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A Crooked Trail

THE STORY OF A THOUSAND-MILE
SADDLE TRIP UP AND DOWN THE TEXAS
FRONTIER IN PURSUIT OF A RUNAWAY
OX, WITH ADVENTURES BY THE WAY

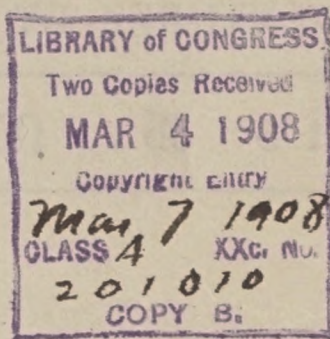
By Lewis B. Miller



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By LEWIS B. MILLER

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A Crooked Trail

CHAPTER I.

THE SPOTTED OX RUNS AWAY.

AT daybreak one morning, near the end of July, and less than a year after we had settled on the Little Pecan Creek, I was startled by a vigorous pounding on the door of the east room of our double log cabin—the room where my younger brother and I slept—and heard father's hearty voice saying:

"Up with you, boys! Up! up! up! Crawl out! Slide out! Bounce out! Out you come!"

"All right!" I managed to call back, though still half asleep. And a little later I emerged from the door, dressed, but with a boot and a sock in each hand, and sat down, drowsily, on the edge of the entry porch to put them on.

"You'd better find the calves and get to milking as soon as you can," mother remarked, from the door of the west room, where she had already begun breakfast.

"Didn't father go after the calves?" I inquired; for he was nowhere about the house. I was now standing up, groping along the wall for my hat. There was not yet light enough to see much.

"No. He spoke of driving up the oxen before they grazed off. He may bring the calves if he finds them and the oxen together; but you'd better not wait on him. Are you going to plow today?"

"Yes, I expect to start to breaking new ground if we can find Lep and Coaly."

My hat was not on its accustomed nail; and after looking everywhere without finding it, I reflected that the sun would hardly get very high before my return with the calves, and I started off bare-headed.

As I passed out through the yard-gate, hatless, coatless and breakfastless, not once did it occur to me that I should be gone more than a few minutes. As a matter of fact, I was destined to be absent nearly two months, during which I should travel a thousand miles and more, and pass through adventures I had never so much as dreamed of.

Crossing the creek at the ford I climbed the hill beyond and soon entered the woods. A few hundred yards farther on, and not far from the log schoolhouse, I came to a little prairie; and there, comfortably bedded in the thick, tall grass, lay all but one of our dry cattle. Coaly, the black ox, was with them, but Lep, his yoke-mate, was nowhere to be seen.

Wondering a little at this, I kept on, and after wandering about through the woods till the sun was shining against the upper tree-

tops, I came upon the calves, all seven of them together. I had rounded them up and was just starting them toward home when father came out of the bushes close by.

"Hello there, father! You've got on my hat!" I called out.

"Yes, I'd discovered that. Mistook it for mine in the dark. Thought it wasn't a very good fit." He took off my broad-rimmed straw head-covering and handed it to me. "Haven't seen anything of Lep, have you?"

"No, sir, I haven't. I noticed Coaly—"

"Yes, I found Coaly, down there at the little prairie, and I've been tramping about through the woods, thinking I might happen upon Lep. He likes to lie down by himself sometimes. How long has it been since you saw him?"

"A week or ten days, I think, father. Lep and Coaly were both at the lick-log, I recollect. They don't often come down to the pen now, unless they get salt-hungry."

"It looks a little suspicious," father said, thoughtfully. "I'm afraid he may have run away again."

"But he couldn't run far, hobbled as he is now," I remarked.

"Yes, I know. He was hobbled. But rawhide has a way of stretching these dewy mornings. He may have lost his hobbles off. If he did, no telling how far he's gone by this time. And now is when we need him worst, too. We ought to get all that new ground turned over before cotton opens. I'll take a walk up toward the prairie and see if I can't run across him."

"Now that you're bare-headed, you'd better drive the calves home and let me look for Lep."

"All right," father agreed, starting after the calves. But he turned to add: "If you don't find him around here, one of us will have to get a horse after breakfast and strike out on his trail, and keep after the rascal till we run him down. But we want to make sure that he's really gone."

Father walked on after the calves, and I started off through the woods. Vic, my little dog, had been with father; but now she left him and followed me. I tramped on for more than a mile, listening constantly for the bell, till I reached the prairie. But not a stroke of the big bell-clapper had I heard.

At the edge of the prairie I happened upon our horses. Dick, my sorrel pony, walked straight up to me and rubbed his nose against me. He had been running on the range for a few months now and was fat and shiny.

"Look here, Dick," I remarked, "guess I'll take a ride if you don't object."

Dick seemed willing enough, and I was quickly astride his round back. Of course there was neither saddle nor bridle. But I had taught him to turn when I leaned forward and slapped him lightly on the side of the head; so there was no trouble in guiding him. I intended to go home, and after eating my breakfast, and obtaining a saddle and bridle, I would start out in quest of the missing ox and keep riding till I found him. But after mounting the pony I decided to follow the edge of the prairie a few hundred yards, in the hope of hearing Lep's bell.

I did soon detect the dingdonging of a big bell; but it came from across the divide, from over in the Bosque Creek country, and was so far away that I could not decide whether it was Lep's bell or some other bell. However, it would not take long to ride over there, and I promptly headed Dick in that direction.

The bell was traveling from me, and not till I had ridden two miles and more did I come up with the animal that wore it. Even

before overtaking the bell I felt sure it was not Lep's; and in that I was right. It was worn by a big red cow.

Now I turned the pony's head homeward. After riding several hundred yards, I came to Hank Richardson's cabin. Before settling here Hank had lived over on the Little Pecan, not far from us. He was a good friend of mine.

His cabin was small, but at the north end was a large brush shed; and it was under this shed that he and his wife and children were just sitting down to breakfast as I rode up to the yard-fence. People lived largely out of doors here during the warm season. Besides the table a bed stood under the shed.

"Hello there! 'Light and look at your saddle!" Hank called out, in tones that might easily have been heard a mile. Hank had a terrific voice.

"Couldn't see it if I did," was my reply. "I'm looking for Lep. Haven't seen anything of him around here, have you?"

"Yes—no, not right around here. I've seen him, though—five or six days ago. I was down at Martin's, and old Lep was standing under the shade of a tree, right in front of Martin's house. I noticed him particularly, because I was a little surprised to see him there. But what made you go and sell your saddle and bridle?"

I explained how I came to be riding without them, and Hank said:

"Then get down and eat a bite of breakfast with us, and I'll lend you mine. Don't have much use for them anyhow. Off with you! Here's a bridle now. You can hitch Dick up with this."

He caught up a bridle from the end of a log and came out to the fence. I was reluctant to stay, but Mrs. Richardson also insisted, and Hank said:

"How many meals have I sat down to at your house? What under the sun do you want to ride all the way home for, when you can just as easily get breakfast here, and then go on over to Martin's and find your ox? You can round up Lep and drive him home before you could go home and get back this far."

"But I'd have to come back to return your bridle and saddle; so it's about as broad as it's long," I objected.

"No, you won't have to return my bridle and saddle. Just let them stay over there till some time when you're passing. No matter if it's a month or two. Off you crawl, before I drag you off!"

Hank's hospitality was of a very hearty, almost violent, kind and I dismounted. After bridling Dick, and hitching him to a limb, I went in and ate with the family. Afterwards, while I was saddling the pony, Mrs. Richardson fed Vic. Then I mounted and started for Martin's. But I soon stopped to shout back:

"Hank, was Lep hobbled?"

"Can't say positively about that. Didn't notice any hobbles, but I wasn't right close to him. He might have been, or he might not."

I rode on. Martin lived four miles farther, in the valley of the Bosque, but on the other side. On arriving at his house, I called "Hello!" Martin himself came to the door.

"Have you noticed a spotted ox around here, with a bell on?" I inquired.

"And with horns like that?" He reached out his arms at full length.

"That's the fellow—that's the ox I'm looking for. He's got about the longest horns I ever saw on a cow-brute. I can't reach from tip to tip. Hank Richardson told me he saw him here in front of your house."

"Yes, that steer was here for a day or two. I noticed him licking at my salt-log once or twice. But he's not here now. Four or five

days ago I took a ride over toward the prairie; and on my way back I met that spotted steer. He was following the main-traveled road and heading toward Lookout Gap. Chances are you'll find him over about Kelly's, at the edge of the prairie."

"Was he hobbled?"

The man shook his head. "No, no hobbles. He was walking a good, steady gait."

"Then I'll have a chase of it," I answered, and was soon hurrying on.

Kelly's house was six or seven miles away, but it was the first one I came to. Only recently had the Comanche Indians ceased their raids here, and the country was still very thinly settled.

Kelly was plowing cotton near the road, in a little field bristling with white-limbed, deadened trees. He was an acquaintance of my father's, and I had seen him a few times.

"Yes, I recollect that steer well enough," he assured me, after I had described Lep. "Couldn't help noticing that pair of horns. Don't know when I've seen a longer pair. No matter where he goes, you can track him by his horns, if anybody sees him. It was four or five days ago that he stopped here. Guess you'll just about run across him somewhere between here and the mountains. If you don't find him standing under a live-oak, I'd advise you to go on to the gap yonder. Some springs there that never dry up, and it's a great watering-place for cattle."

I was starting on, when Kelly said:

"I'm going to ride over to the Little Pecan country after dinner. I'm agent for a nursery, you know. I talked with your father last spring, and he told me he might want some fruit-trees this coming fall. So I'm going to call on him and others and take their orders."

"If you're going over there," I said, "please be sure to tell the folks you saw me, and that I'm riding Dick and on Lep's trail, and that they needn't look for me till they see me."

"All right; I'll tell your father what has become of you."

"And be sure to tell him I'm riding Dick." Then I explained that I had started from home without anything, and had accumulated what I had on the way.

Kelly laughed. "I'll tell him how it is. And you don't seem to have any lariat. If you'll ride over to the house I'll lend you mine. I've got a good one, fifty feet long. You can leave it here on your way back."

"It might come in pretty handy, and I'm much obliged to you, Mr. Kelly," was my reply. And when he came with the rope I added: "But no telling when you'll see your lariat again. I'm going to overhaul that ox, if it takes me all the rest of the summer."

"That's all right," he assured me. "I don't expect to need it any time soon." He coiled the rope neatly and handed it to me.

I hung it on my saddle-horn and rode on.

Kelly lived in the post-oak and black-jack woods, but the road soon led me out upon the high prairie. Ahead of me, and apparently less than a mile away, a range of low mountains, rising steeply up out of the prairie, stretched across my course. But I had traveled this road twice already, and knew that those mountains were twelve miles distant.

The summer before father and I had made a wagon-trip up into the Little Pecan country, to look at the land father afterwards bought. And my first view of this whole region had been obtained from the top of those mountains. We had returned by a different road; but in the November following we had come again. This time we were moving—changing our home from within sight of the capitol building at Austin to this new and sparsely settled part of

Texas. On the second trip father drove our heavily loaded covered wagon, while my brother and I rode behind, pushing along our little herd of twenty-seven cattle and two yearling colts.

We had camped one night in one of those mountain-coves, near Lookout Gap, through which the road ran, and which was now in plain sight. As I well knew there was not a house from here to the mountains, and none till ten miles beyond. It was easier to live in the timber in those days than it was to haul wood and rails out upon the prairie. So the nearest house was twenty-two miles ahead.

Lep was not one of the cattle we had driven into the country. Father had bought him and Coaly, for heavy plowing, soon after our arrival on the Little Pecan. About the beginning of warm weather, having been allowed to run out on the range with nothing to do for a good while, Lep had deserted Coaly, his work-mate, and started off across the country. It might have been mere restlessness that made him go—the restlessness, or desire to travel, that often seizes animals, and especially horses and cattle, as well as people. But we knew that he and Coaly had been brought from somewhere in southwest Texas, three or four hundred miles away, and the natural inference was that he was trying to get back to his old range.

We had missed him soon after he started; and father had followed and overtaken him somewhere on this very prairie. Since then Lep had worn hobbles constantly.

But now the hobbles were off, and he was gone again, with four or five days the start of me. If he had kept traveling steadily all this time, except when grazing or resting, he must be more than a hundred miles ahead. It was important that no time be lost; otherwise I should have gone back and taken a new start.

So I pushed on into the unsettled country, fearing that there was a long chase ahead of me, yet trying to persuade myself that Lep would be tempted by the water and fine pasturage to linger along his way, and that I should overtake him somewhere out here, before he had wandered many miles farther.

CHAPTER II.

A NIGHT AT LOOKOUT GAP.

THE far-stretching prairie which my hunt for the runaway ox had led me out upon was dotted over with long live-oak trees and little live-oak groves—dark-green islands in a sea of brighter green. Numerous bunches of long-horned cattle could be seen grazing here and there, or standing or lying in the shade of the live-oaks. Thinking that Lep might have sought companionship among some of these, I spent all the rest of the forenoon riding from one bunch to another, but without finding him.

When at length my shadow, pointing due north, indicated the hour of noon, sharp hunger had attacked me, but not a bite of anything had I to appease it. Dick, I knew, must be even hungrier than I was. So I dismounted in the shade of a big, thick-topped, spreading live-oak. After removing saddle and bridle, I tied one end of Kelly's lariat around the pony's neck and the other end to a low-hanging limb. Luxuriant grass crowded close up to the tree, and even under it, and the little horse was soon eagerly filling himself.

It was a splendid summer day. Now and then a slight breeze rippled the sea of grass around me. The sun shone brilliantly, hotly down, and the whole prairie was ringing with the voices of grass-hoppers and other cheerful sounds. After gazing at prairie and mountains for a while, as they shimmered in the heat, I threw myself down on the thickest grass, in the thickest shade. My little dog came and sat down close by.

"Vic," I said, "we can't eat grass; so we might as well take a nap."

Vic wagged her tail responsively, and I stretched myself at full length, with my arm for a pillow, and was soon fast asleep.

I must have slept an hour or two. When I awoke, Dick had grazed his fill and was standing quietly in the shade. Vic was lying near me. The day was now at its hottest, and I waited half an hour or so longer before saddling up. While waiting I climbed to the very top of the live-oak and took a survey of the whole country, but failed to discover the object of my search.

When at length I was riding on my general course was toward the mountains, but I kept zigzagging across the road, going out to every bunch of cattle I came in sight of for a mile or two on both sides.

The sun was not very high when I arrived at Lookout Gap—a break or pass through the mountain-range. Old settlers insisted that it had been so named because, from the first settling of the country until a year or two ago, one had to look out for redskins if he went over there. In the gap I stood and gazed both ways, but not in search of Indians. They would never come again. Finally I dismounted, and while the pony grazed I climbed one of the broken, jagged ends of the mountain for a wider view.

From this elevated position I could make out a little drove of cattle south of the mountains, but a mile or two east of the gap. They were grazing near the foot of the range, and among them could be distinguished two spotted animals that bore some resemblance to the one I was looking for. So I slid and stumbled down the steep slope, sprang into the saddle and trotted away to investigate.

While riding along the foot of the mountains I frightened several herds of deer grazing in the coves. One herd numbered a dozen or more. Once, in a little patch of woods, I scared up some wild turkeys. There was an abundance of game here.

Again, for perhaps the twentieth time today, disappointment met me. Neither of the spotted animals was Lep.

The sun was near to setting by the time I got back to the gap. Now I was in a serious quandary as to what to do. The nearest house was ten miles ahead. If there had been anything to eat here I should have camped at once, for I had already ridden many miles, and Dick, hardy as the little fellow was, was showing signs of weariness. It looked very much as if I should either have to go supperless or ride on. If I had had my gun I should have tried for a deer or a turkey; but my only weapon was a pocket-knife.

While sitting in the saddle, debating the matter, I heard a squeaking close by; and presently Vic came out of the tall grass, dragging a mule-eared rabbit that she had pounced upon and killed as he sat in his nest. The little dog was hungry, too, and looked up at me as if to say: "Here's something for our supper."

Quickly I dismounted and examined the game. It was a young animal, only about two-thirds grown, and plainly both fat and tender. Now I thrust my hand first into one pocket and then the other. I did not smoke—I have always detested tobacco—but I had been burning brush on our cleared ground recently, and perhaps I still had a match.

All that my most careful search could discover was a broken piece of a match. But it was the right end. After examining it closely, I decided that there was fire in it.

"Dick and Vic, that settles it," I exclaimed enthusiastically. "We're going to camp somewhere close by to-night. Vic, we'll have broiled rabbit for supper, but no bread or salt."

Vic wagged her tail, stuck up her expressive ears and looked up at me as much as to say that if she had plenty of broiled rabbit she could get along without anything else.

Tying the game behind my saddle, I led Dick through the live-oak grove where we had camped the fall before, and up into a cove where some timber grew. Here I gathered up an armful of dry wood and brush, tied them with the end of Dick's lariat, and hung the bundle to the saddle-horn. Then, after collecting another and bigger armful, I started for the open prairie, leading the pony.

There was plenty of wood in the cove, and ordinarily it would have been the best camping-place. But, for different reasons, I did not care to camp here to-night. One reason: there was no water here, and I had no vessel to carry any in. But a far stronger reason was that the mountain-top was covered with dense, impenetrable thickets of scrub-oak, in whose thorny fastnesses, I had been informed, numerous wild animals of prey, such as wolves and wildcats and mountain-lions, and a few bears, had their hiding-places. The wolves and wildcats I did not particularly fear, but the bears and mountain-lions I much preferred to have no dealings with, especially while unarmed.

Before leaving the cove I noticed Vic nosing excitedly in the grass among some bushes, and on making an investigation found that she had discovered a wild turkey's nest, with six speckled, freckled eggs in it. These would make a valuable addition to our meager bill of fare, and I transferred them from the nest to my pockets.

A few hundred yards south of the mountains was a scattering line of small willows, and there I found a little stream. Throwing down my wood on its bank I removed Dick's saddle and bridle, and

after tying the end of his lariat to a bush left him to help himself to water and grass.

By this time darkness was settling down, and the loneliness of my situation was already upon me. I now began my preparations for spending the night here.

Selecting a suitable place, I carefully pulled all the grass for a yard or two around. This was to keep my camp-fire from spreading. But the grass itself I put to one side, to be used for a bed later. Then I arranged my kindling and some of my wood, and soon a cheerful, crackling fire was blazing up. Now I felt less lonely.

First I skinned the mule-ear. After washing it in the stream I cut it into pieces, impaled each of the hams on a willow stick, and held them over the fire to broil. All the while, to keep from getting lonely, I carried on a steady if one-sided conversation with Vic.

"Smells delicious, don't it, little dog? Won't take long to broil it now. Wish we had a sprinkle of salt to rub on it. But, salted or not, there won't be a smell of it left when we get through."

Vic was sitting near me, with her ears pricked up alertly, while she eyed the broiling game with hungry solicitude. When talking to her I could hear her tail rustling the grass as she wagged it sociably, responsively.

After the hams had been appetizingly browned, I laid them on the grass; and having thrust other parts of the rabbit through with the sticks, I stuck the sticks well into the ground, over the fire, and left them to take care of themselves. Now I gave Vic one of the hams and myself went to work on the other. We were both hungry, and the hams were not half enough. The other pieces were broiled by this time, and I divided them between us. Soon the mule-ear's bones had been picked clean.

I had intended to save the turkey-eggs till morning; but my hunger was unsatisfied, and the temptation to eat them to-night was very strong.

"Vic," I remarked, "we'll have a square meal now, and try to reach the settlements in time for breakfast."

The two eggs that I first buried in the embers to roast exploded loudly, one after the other, scattering ashes and fragments of themselves for yards around. With the others I was more careful, making holes in the shells, and standing them in the embers open ends up. They were soon roasted to perfection. Vic ate one and I the other three. There was enough but not a bite too much.

Supper finished I leaned back with a sigh of satisfaction. Night had long since closed down upon the scene. The steep, wild mountain, veiled in gloom, seemed to overhang me. Somewhere over to the west a wolf kept yelping; and on the mountain-top close by two wildcats were engaged in a bitter quarrel, snarling and screaming at each other defiantly. Sometimes Vic, excited by their clamor, ran off into the darkness to bark at them.

Once more, a few weeks later, I should look upon this scene as it was now. After that twenty years would pass ere I should return. And then I should stand upon the broken end of the mountain and look down into the gap—upon something very different. The mountains themselves would be unchanged, but all the surrounding country would be netted over with barbed-wire fences, dividing it into farms and pastures, and dotted over with farm-houses. And in the gap, the wild, rugged break in the mountain-range which I could now see dimly, would stand a busy little town—in the very gap, and spreading out on each side of it like a fan. There would be stores and shops and a cotton-gin, and pretty, neatly painted cottages, and a schoolhouse and churches. What a change—what a wonderful change!

And as I should stand and gaze down upon the changed scene, though my judgment would tell me that this was better, something within me would keep saying, as I recalled this night: "They have spoiled it all—they have spoiled it all!"

And even now, while I am writing this story, far from the scene of that night's lonely camp, there comes over me a feeling of deep regret, amounting almost to sadness, for the old wild days—the days that will not return.

But to-night, as I sat in the ring of light encircling my camp-fire, I was not thinking about the distant future. My thoughts were busy, rather, with the task ahead of me—the task of overtaking and bringing back my runaway ox. Lep had a decided advantage; for while he could keep traveling the greater part of the time, I was under the necessity of searching the country on both sides of the road, lest I should pass him. This advantage, and the fact that he already had three or four or even five days the start of me, made my undertaking a peculiarly difficult one.

But I was tired after a long day in the saddle, and soon began to think of sleeping. All that I had to sleep on was the grass—the grass I had already pulled and some more; but I arranged it carefully, and soon had a fairly comfortable bed. At the head of the bed I placed my saddle for a pillow, with some grass on it to mitigate its hardness. My saddle-blanket I unfolded and placed near me, for use only in case the night grew cool enough for cover. As yet, however, there was no indication of that.

Then, after moving the pony to fresh grass, beyond the stream, and lying down for a drink, I came back and went to bed—my cool, fragrant, grassy bed. Vic lay down in reach of my head, where she could run her sharp little nose about in my hair.

As I lay there, with the blue sky and the innumerable host of stars above me, and the nearest human habitation ten miles away, I felt a sense of loneliness, and at the same time a peculiar sense of satisfaction over my wild surroundings. The cries of prowling wild animals of prey on the mountains were mingled with the voices of night-birds and the shrill singing of harmless insects in the grass around me, and—and then I was fast asleep.

Once or twice, I know not how long afterwards, I remembered being half awake and sitting up and looking about me drowsily, to recall where I was. But I saw only the dim prairie, and the dark mountain overhanging me, with Vic lying at my head and the pony cropping the grass busily but a few yards away. Then I dropped down and was asleep again.

It must have been a good while after midnight when I was awakened once more, this time very differently. The pony was snorting in alarm, and Vic, backed up against the saddle, was growling fiercely, while every hair seemed to be standing on end in angry defiance. I leaped to my feet.

Following her gaze, I detected the outline of some large-sized animal, which I quickly recognized as a mountain lion! The beast had its gaze fixed upon both me and the dog, and kept growling ominously in reply.

My first impulse was to make a dash for Dick, spring upon him and take to flight. But before I could do so I happened to notice that some small sticks of my nearly dead camp-fire were still blazing slightly, though not enough to give any light.

Following another impulse, I snatched up a stick and thrust it into the high, thick grass close by. The grass was mostly green, but there was plenty of dry grass in it—of last year's growth—to burn readily.

The blaze leaped upward out of the grass with a frying, crackling sound, and quickly began to light up the surrounding prairie. As the flames rose skyward, and the circle of light widened, the lion was soon in plain view.

But only for a few moments. The unexpected glare was too much for him. With one disappointed snarl the brute turned tail and fled toward the mountain, quickly vanishing into the outlying darkness.

The fire, though burning slowly in the green grass and motionless air, soon spread till it was lighting up the prairie for hundreds of yards around. Presently it occurred to me that it had served its purpose, and that I ought not allow it to sweep the whole country.

Breaking off a willow bush, I fell to thrashing the flames with that. But it proved too light, and I caught up my saddle-blanket, plunged it into the stream, and went to work vigorously. The blanket was far more effective, but so thick was the grass that not till after an hour of the hardest, hottest fighting I ever did was the fire completely subdued. And then a black, smoking area lay like a big ink-spot in the green prairie.

The sweat was now dripping from my face, and I washed and splashed in the water till I had cooled myself. Then I carried my saddle across the stream, to the unburnt prairie, and sat down by it. The excitement of fighting the fire and the fright from the mountain-lion had banished all thoughts of sleep.

For perhaps an hour I leaned against the saddle and gazed off into the semi-darkness. Vic did the same, and kept up a pretty regular barking at what she heard. I half expected the mountain-lion to return. But now I was closer to the pony, and Vic would not fail to give me timely warning.

Finally, becoming weary, I lay down with my head on the saddle, and before I knew it was asleep again.

Vic's barking awoke me. I sprang up suddenly, looking around in fright for the lion. But no lion was to be seen. A waning moon had risen during my last sleep, and was now bathing prairie and mountain in a dim, soft light. I stood gazing about me, feeling like one in a dream.

Now I became aware that there was no indication of danger in Vic's barking. All she heard was the baying of some hounds.

The baying drew rapidly nearer. Soon two deer, a doe and her half-grown fawn, came into view through the hazy moonlight. Both, it was easy to see, had run far and were failing in strength. There were other mountains a few miles to the southeast and they had probably run all the way from there.

The fugitives passed very near. To me there was something pathetic in their terror-filled eyes. Vic was eager to join in the chase, but I held her back.

Scarcely had the hard-pressed fugitives passed when the leading hound came by, soon followed by nearly a dozen others. So eager were they that they scarcely noticed me, even when I tried to scold them back.

Now for the first time I discovered a little drove of cattle lying between me and the mountain—thirty or forty head. As the hounds approached, the drove were all quickly upon their feet.

At first I thought the hounds had left the deer and were attacking the cattle; but a little later I discovered what was the matter. The doe and her fawn, being too nearly exhausted to climb the steep mountain, had taken refuge among the cattle. When the hounds came up the cattle confronted them with a threatening array of horns. The dogs ran round, but everywhere they encountered that horned ring.

In vain the hounds tried to reach their intended victims. Not only could they not break through, but the moment a dog came too close a cow or steer would rush out of the circle and chase him furiously for a hundred yards.

Public sentiment was against hunting deer at this time of the year; and as the owner of the pack did not come I inferred that the hounds had gone hunting of their own accord.

Finding they could not penetrate that defensive ring, the dogs stationed themselves around the cattle, at a safe distance, and sat down to wait. Every now and then one of them would bay in that dismal, doleful way that only a flop-eared hound can bay. While I was still watching the interesting situation, moonlight began to give place to daylight.

Now I walked out toward the cattle and tried to call off the dogs. The one I approached only barked at me, which so provoked me that I moved around him to the foot of the mountain, where stones were plentiful, and began to let fly at him. Once started, I hurled stone after stone till the whole pack abandoned the chase and fled back the way they had come.

Soon afterward the cattle moved away, and the doe and her young one, having rested, broke out of the group and bounded away up the mountain-side. Soon they disappeared among the scrubby timber that covered those upper slopes.

While walking back to my camp, I was wondering how the deer had learned to avail themselves of the cattle's protection. Was this the first time the doe or any of her kind had made use of that expedient? Or had the deer learned long ago that the hostility of the horned animals toward all beasts of prey was something that could safely be depended upon? Perhaps they had learned that when the first cattle came into the country. Possibly it was something they had known for ages, having found it out when the buffaloes were here, and when the wolves, the common enemies of both, had made it necessary for the defenseless deer to seek the companionship of their horned friends. But, however and whenever learned, it was certainly an ingenious and useful expedient.

By the time daylight had fully come I had saddled Dick and was riding on in quest of my lost ox. With the coming of morning my courage and determination, both of which had weakened a little during the hours of darkness, returned with full force. That ox must be brought back if I had to follow him to the "jumping-off place." And I should have need of all my determination; for, as the sequel proved, a long, difficult and even dangerous chase was ahead of me.

CHAPTER III.

WITH THE HERMIT SHEPHERD.

I WAS still in the prairie country and, as on the day before, kept turning aside to investigate every bell I heard and every bunch of cattle I caught sight of. There were not so many cattle here as north of the mountains, and but little time was lost. I pushed steadily southward, and the sun was not very high when I arrived at the first house. Here a pack of hounds, the same that had pursued the doe and her fawn, ran out and surrounded the pony, barked and bayed at me with a deafening clamor.

Evidently the family were not early risers; for they were just sitting down to breakfast, at the shady end of their cabin, when, pushing my way through the noisy pack, I rode up to the yard fence and inquired for a spotted ox with very long horns and a big bell.

"Why, yes; that animal was here just yisterday—no, the day before," the man informed me. "He stopped here some time durin' the night, I guess it was. Anyhow, I found 'im layin' out there by the cow-lot gate, lickin' hisself, when I went out to milk next mornin'. That was the first I'd seen of 'im, and the last. But he must be some'r's around here. Where do you live?"

"Up beyond the mountains, in the Little Pecan Creek country. Nearly forty miles from here, it must be."

"And where did you stay last night?"

"Back yonder close to the gap. I camped out, and slept on the grass."

"Then get down—get down and have some breakfast with us," the man was quick to urge, with the usual frontier hospitality.

I had expected this invitation, and was very glad to receive it.

"I haven't got a red cent with me, but—" I had begun to explain.

The man interrupted with a wave of his hand. "We ain't a-runnin' no tavern. If you can put up with what little you'll git, you're welcome to it."

So I turned my pony loose to graze, with his lariat trailing, and went in. And a very good breakfast they gave me. While eating, I relating how I had left home without anything, even a hat, and had accumulated all my present possessions on the way. The family were much interested, and the man said:

"If you're goin' on, I can lend you a good slicker. You might run into a rain some'r's along."

I thanked him and accepted his offer, though not till after explaining that it might be a good while before I could return the coat.

While we were eating Vic sat near the table, watching us hungrily. Fearing her wants might be overlooked I told how she had given me warning when the mountain-lion came prowling around my camp. I also explained how I had scared the lion away by firing the grass, and what a hard fight I had to put out the fire afterwards. "Lucky you had the little fyst along," the man remarked. "If you hadn't, you might have waked up to find that lion on top of you. Not a bit too good to do that very thing if they get a fair chanst, them varmints ain't. I've killed five of the creatures out here. The hounds treed 'em and I shot 'em."

I also mentioned how Vic had provided our supper by catching the mule-ear and finding the wild turkey's nest.

"Why, she's a nice little thing," the woman said. "Wisht we had one like her instid of all them hounds." She called Vic to her, and after patting her on the head fed the little dog more than she could eat.

Then, in spite of my protests, the woman wrapped up something for my dinner and forced it upon me. I thanked her heartily, and after rolling the package in my borrowed slicker, and tying them behind my saddle, I mounted and rode on.

Houses were few and far between. On my left rose a mountain-range; on my right, but several miles distant, spread out an extensive forest. I kept working on both sides of the road as I advanced. At the first house I failed to learn anything; but inquiry at the second house brought out the information that Lep had been seen to pass there two days before, following the road.

"I could tell he was runnin' away from home, and I had half a mind to stop 'im," the settler remarked. "Sorry now I didn't."

"So am I," I replied, and hurried on.

Believing that the ox was now traveling steadily, I, too, took the road and pushed on after him, stopping only to visit the nearest bunches of cattle, and to make inquiries at every house.

Well on in the afternoon I forded the Leon River, and not far beyond it came to a small town. There were only two or three stores, a blacksmith shop and a cotton-gin. I made my usual inquiries, but Lep had not been seen. However, there was little doubt that he had passed. Coming from where I had last got word of him, he would have gone through here after dark.

Realizing now that the old fellow was likely to lead me a long and lively chase, I entered the postoffice, and approaching the postmaster with some diffidence, said:

"I'm sixty or seventy miles from home, on the trail of a runaway ox, and without a cent in my pocket. I want a postal card to write to my father. If you'll lend me one, I'll mail you another as soon as I—"

He stopped me with a gesture, then reached up, got a card, and laid it on the counter. "It's too little to bother about," he remarked, carelessly. The average Texan scorns to waste time with anything less than a nickel.

With a borrowed pen, I leaned on the show-case and wrote. After mentioning some of my experiences—the less exciting ones—I concluded by saying:

"I am hot on his trail, and expect to stay with him till I track him down, if it takes till cotton-picking time."

Then I slipped the card into the letter-box and was soon on the road again.

As Dick trotted along, I entertained myself by imagining how that card would be received at home.

"I wish Travis would come back and let the old steer go," mother would say. "I don't like to have him wandering all over the country by himself."

Then father would speak up in his brisk, hearty way:

"No, no, let him alone—let him alone! We need that ox and we need him mighty bad. And on top of that, it'll be the making of the boy. A boy that don't know how to hang on and hang on and hang on, no matter what he undertakes, or how hard it turns out, will never be worth the powder and lead it would take to blow his head off."

My road was now leading me toward the southwest. At a house a few miles beyond town Lep had been seen again. After that I

entered a rough, broken country, half prairie and half brush, and the settlements ceased altogether. The road was old, but dim and little traveled. In places I could make out tracks which I believed to be Lep's. On I pushed, mile after mile, mile after mile.

At length the sun sank low, and Vic, trotting along by the pony, kept looking up as if to ask if it wasn't high time to find a camping-place. Recalling my experience with the mountain-lion I was very reluctant to spend another night out of doors, especially in this wild region.

While still debating what to do I was much relieved to hear dogs barking and sheep bleating, somewhere off to my right, and a good distance away. Quickly the pony was heading in that direction.

Nearly a mile from the road I came upon a sheep-ranch. It was by no means a pretentious affair, consisting of little besides a big rail-pen for the sheep and a cabin for the shepherd.

The man, a wild-looking fellow, with a great, bushy brown beard, was just penning his numerous flock for the night. I waited till they were all in and the gate shut, then rode up and made my inquiry, well punctuated now with bleats. The shepherd had not seen Lep. After waiting in vain for an invitation to get down, I ventured to ask:

"What would be the chance to stay all night?"

"Why, certainly you can stay—certainly—certainly—certainly!"

The words were spoken with an earnestness that was little short of vehemence. Though surprised, I was well pleased at receiving so warm a welcome. My attempt to explain that I had no money was promptly cut short with:

"Feel just as free here as if you had a gold-mine in your pocket."

While I was unsaddling Dick the shepherd remarked, pointing:

"You'd better take him over yonder a few hundred yards. The sheep haven't been over there for some time. He'll think himself too good to feed after them, I guess."

While being led away Dick kept putting down his head for a mouthful of grass, but only sniffed at it contemptuously. Having found a place where he was willing to graze I tied him to a sumac bush and left him for the night.

Returning to the cabin I saw the shepherd going out with a milk-bucket on his arm and followed him. No cows were in sight, but several goats were browsing around outside, and some noisy kids occupied a little pen at the end of the sheep-pen.

"What! Do you milk goats?" I inquired, half incredulously. I had read of such a thing but had never yet seen it.

"Why yes. Why not? They give good milk. They associate with my sheep, too, and cows wouldn't, I guess."

I watched the goat-milking process curiously. At last I took a cup and tried to milk one myself, using my thumb and fore finger, as the shepherd did. The attempt was fairly successful, but I did not try another one. The shepherd milked the rest, while I stood watching a long-bearded, patriarchal-appearing Billy-goat as he stalked about the pen.

The milking finished we returned to the cabin, the shepherd carrying his milk and I my saddle. By this time darkness had come on. The man, whose name, I had learned, was Groves, kindled a little fire in a big fireplace and set about preparing supper.

The interior of the cabin, as revealed by the flickering firelight, was very rudely furnished—almost unfurnished. There were no chairs, and no floor but the ground. The only bed was half a wagon-load of prairie grass in a corner, with a buffalo-robe and some blankets on it. In front of the fire a large-sized dry-goods box, turned bottom up, served for a table at meal-time and for a seat

at other times. In one corner lay a saddle, sprawling on its back; in another stood a gun, an old, retired army musket; and high against the wall hung a six-shooter, neck-deep in its leather scabbard. These, with a few cooking vessels, dropped where last used around the fireplace, and some sheepskins tacked against the wall to dry, made up the cabin's contents. No window cut the logs, the gaping spaces between them being amply sufficient to let in air and light when the door was shut.

Groves cooked some corn-cakes in a frying pan, and fried some slices of bacon—all drowned in grease. These, with black sorghum molasses from a jug and some goat's milk made up our supper. The milk was warm and had, to me, a peculiar taste, the bacon was fat and the bread soggy; but I was far too hungry to care for such trifles. We sat on the ground, and ate out of tin plates and drank out of tin cups, which the shepherd had fished out from under the box.

The meal ended for us, Groves fed his two dogs and Vic, then shut the door and came back and washed his tin dishes. Afterwards he divided his grass-pile, putting half of it and the buffalo-robe in another place for me to sleep on. Now he filled and fired his pipe, and we sat on the big box and talked, by the firelight. And a very interesting talker I found him.

"How old would you suppose I am?" he asked, in the course of the conversation.

I looked at his big, bushy beard and guessed forty.

"You're thirteen years off. I'm not quite twenty-seven." He laughed and seemed rather pleased than otherwise.

Greatly surprised, I inquired if he had no razor.

"Yes, but I'm letting it rest now. I'm letting my beard grow for a—well, I'm letting it grow. People that knew me without it wouldn't begin to know me with it; and people that know me with it wouldn't begin to know me without it."

Something in the way this was said made me infer that he was wearing it as a disguise. And the suspicion flashed into my mind that possibly the fellow was a fugitive from justice.

After inquiring where I lived, and how long I had lived there, he said:

"I'm a Virginian. Two thousand miles from home I am now, and I get mighty, mighty homesick and lonesome sometimes. Eight years have gone by since I saw my folks; and it's a good while since I even heard from 'em."

"Have you lived on a sheep-ranch all that time?"

"All but a few months of it," he answered. "I hired out to a sheep-raiser only a week or two after I struck west Texas, and I've been tied to sheep ever since. Three years I herded for another man. After that I bought me a little flock, a mere handful, and started out on my own hook. That was in—in another part of the country. I pegged down right here just fourteen months ago. Let me tell you, I had some stirring times when I first struck the range. Twice the Comanches dashed in among the sheep, and killed some and stampeded the others—scattered 'em like a whirlwind scatters chaff."

"It's a wonder they didn't carry off your scalp," I remarked.

"Yes, it is—a great wonder. But once I took to the brush and dodged 'em, and once I jumped onto my pony and outran the red rascals. Do you ever drink—ever touch whiskey?" he suddenly demanded.

"No, never," I replied, wondering greatly what this abrupt question had to do with sheep-herding and Indians.

"Then, whatever you do, stick to that—stick to that!" he fairly

hissed, as he leaned toward me. "Then you'll never have to leave home and go off into a wild, half-civilized country, among desperadoes and redskins."

He changed the subject at once, leaving me with the impression, however, that whatever trouble had sent him out here drink had been at the bottom of it.

We talked on; or, rather, Groves talked, while I listened or asked questions. He told me much about his former home, and of the modes of living in that far-away, and, to me, largely unknown country.

Suddenly our three dogs outside burst into a loud, excited barking.

"Sh!" the shepherd whispered, warningly, as he sprang to his feet. For a few moments he stood motionless, listening intently. Once, while he was in this attitude, his eyes met mine, and even in the dim firelight I could detect a wild, half-terrified look in them—the look of a hunted animal!

Suddenly he sprang back to the corner and snatched up his gun, the old army musket.

"Don't you hear 'em—can't you hear 'em?" he whispered excitedly, coming close to me. That wild, strange look was still in his eyes.

"Who is it?" I demanded, much mystified and not a little alarmed at his strange conduct.

"The cattle-men! They're coming to kill me! They're right close here!"

Snatching up a board, his makeshift for a shovel, he began to shovel ashes frantically upon the little fire. Nor did he stop till the last spark had been blotted out.

Now I understood. Often I had heard of those fierce, murderous quarrels that break out between sheep-men and cattle-men. But never before had I come in personal touch with one. The shepherd's manner meant but too plainly that he was in terror for his life.

After moving slowly, stealthily around the wall, listening and peering out, he returned to where I was standing, in the center of the room, and whispered excitedly:

"The cattle-men have been trying to kill me and they're coming tonight to try harder. They're somewhere right close by now. They want to get near enough to stick their guns between the logs. When they once do that, they'll blow me to atoms, and you with me!"

Now I too was frightened, and heartily wished I had camped out in the brush somewhere—anywhere. Mountain-lions, frightful things though they were, were far less to be dreaded than these cattle-raising assassins.

Presently Groves moved over to the wall, then came back and thrust something cold into my hands. It was his six-shooter.

"Are you brave?" he whispered, almost hissed, into my ear.

"Not to hurt," I answered.

"Can you fight?"

"I'd rather not."

"Can you die?"

"I'd—I'd a good deal rather not," I protested. At this strange question, icy chills of horror began to chase one another up and down my back.

Soon the dogs burst out again, louder than before. Listening anxiously, my ear detected something that I took to be light, cautious footsteps not far away.

"Don't you hear 'em now?" whispered the shepherd. "Don't you hear 'em slipping up? They're coming closer and closer! And they'll get me—oh, I just know they'll get me to-night! But I'm glad you're with me. It won't be so hard to die when you've got company. We'll die together!"

CHAPTER IV.

ON GUARD FOR ASSASSINS.

YES, we'll die together," Groves kept repeating, as if the statement afforded him no little consolation.

"Not if I can help it," I said to myself. And at once I began to wonder how I could escape.

"Did they ever try to kill you before?" I wanted to know, after recovering from my first fright.

"Time and again—time and again," he assured me. "But I was always on my guard. I was too sharp for 'em. But they'll get me yet—oh, I just know they'll get me! But I'll get some of them first. Now see if I don't."

"Maybe you're worse scared than there's need for," I suggested. "Why should the cattle-men want to kill you?"

"To get me out of the way, of course. Then they'll kill the sheep, to get them out of the way. And they'll be here to-night—yes, sir, they'll be here to-night! Now watch what I tell you. I've had my warning that they're going to kill me if they can—if they can! But I'm watching out for 'em, and I'll get lots of them if they don't look sharp. Lucky you stopped here to-night. You can help me guard the house. I can't guard both sides at once, but with you to watch one side, maybe we can keep 'em off. Anyhow, we'll try."

I did not answer. The arrangement was little to my taste. It was no quarrel of mine, and I should have been more than glad to keep clear of it. It would be cowardly, though, to desert the shepherd in his hour of peril. And if the cattle-men were already around the house, there might be less danger in staying than going. So, six-shooter in hand, I moved over to the wall and began to peer out between the logs in quest of assassins.

The night was partly cloudy, but there was light enough to reveal objects dimly. For several minutes I kept a cautious watch, but failed to discover anything dangerous. Groves, who was watching near the door, soon tiptoed over to my side to caution me not to shut an eye till the moon rose. All our conversation was carried on in whispers.

"If you let the scoundrels crawl up close enough, they'll blow us both to pieces," he declared.

"Why should they kill me?" I inquired, with a shudder.

"Because they won't know us apart in the dark. Kill one, kill both. You can depend on that. We'll die together."

This was terrible. While Groves moved on around the wall, my excited brain kept revolving various plans to escape; but not one seemed safer than staying here and defending the cabin. So I resolved to make the best of a bad situation.

Long I watched there, with ears strained and my eyes searching the darkness outside. Slowly, gradually my fears subsided. Perhaps the cattle-men might not come tonight, after all.

"Have they ever actually tried to kill you?" I inquired, when Groves, who was seldom still, got round to me again.

"Ever tried to kill me? Well, I rather guess they have—a dozen times at least. But I'm too sharp for 'em. I always see 'em slipping up to the cabin, and then I let drive."

"What! Did you shoot at them?"

"Of course I have. Fifty times, I guess."

"And did you hit any of them?"

"Yes, I have—that I have! I've let daylight through seven of the scoundrels; and I'll kill about seven more, I hope, before they finish me. Oh, I'll sell my life dearly. You can count on that. And they know it, too; every mother's son of 'em knows it. Yes, they're bound to get me at last."

"Do you mean to tell me that you've actually killed seven of the cattle-men?" I demanded. The thought of all those seven corpses, lying pale and stark, well-nigh froze my blood.

"Yes, sirree! That's just what I did! I laid out seven of the scoundrels neatly, and I hope to lay out seven or eight more before they finish me. But they'll get me at last—they'll get me at last," he repeated, half sadly, as if realizing his inevitable doom.

He moved on around the wall, and I stood staring after him. The full horror of the fellow's confession had taken possession of me. No wonder the cattle-raisers were after this man, bent on vengeance, when he had killed seven of their number! And no wonder Groves, with all that blood red on his hands, had little hope of escaping the cattle-men's vengeance in the end!

"If you see or hear anything suspicious, blaze away at it," he said on coming to me again. "The more we shoot of 'em, the longer we have to live."

"Did you kill all seven right close here?" I asked, unable to drive that ghastly subject out of my mind.

"Yes. Every one was knocked over in a dozen yards of this cabin," was the reply, almost exultantly uttered. There was not the slightest sign of remorse. "They tried to sneak up to blow my brains out, but I was too quick for the rascals. The first thing they knew they were stretched out on the ground, kicking as hard as they could. My! how hard some of 'em did kick! One fellow kept kicking and flouncing about nearly five minutes after I knocked him over."

This was said with as little feeling as if he had been talking about the weather.

"Have you never been arrested?"

"No. The cattle-men won't put the sheriff after me, because they want to kill me themselves. They will, too, and that before very long; but not till I've laid out some more of them. Maybe I'll get to shoot a few more tonight—who knows? Anyhow, I hope so. We must both keep a sharp lookout."

He moved on, and I stood by the wall, peering out into the darkness, and listening for any sound that would give warning of the enemy's approach. My thoughts, however, kept running on what I had just heard. Evidently Groves was a desperate, cold-blooded fellow, fully capable of taking care of himself. To say that I wished myself miles from here would be far short of expressing my feelings. If I escaped this time, I promised myself never to stop anywhere again, especially with a lone man, without knowing something of his history. Should the vengeance of the cattle-men fall tonight, I must inevitably be a victim to it. In leaving an out-of-doors camp to spend a night here, I had jumped out of the frying pan into the fire.

An hour or two dragged by, and still nothing suspicious and been seen or heard. My fears had largely subsided, and I began to grow drowsy. After losing so much sleep the night before, and riding hard all day, weariness was heavy upon me. The bed Groves had prepared for my use was at my feet, and I sat down on the edge of it. The shepherd had called the dogs inside, and Vic came and

curled herself up near me. Soon I lay down on my face, in such a position that I could see out between the logs. The six-shooter was in my hand.

While reminding myself that I must by all means remain awake, I fell asleep.

How long I slept is uncertain; but I awoke with a start to find somebody shaking me. I grabbed the six-shooter and started to my feet, under the impression that the cattle-men had got into the cabin and seized me. But it was only the shepherd.

"They're coming now! They're right close by!" he was whispering excitedly. "Don't you hear 'em—can't you hear 'em?"

I listened with all my ears, and certainly did detect footsteps somewhere not far away.

"Now keep a sharp lookout on your side, and I'll keep a sharp lookout on my side, and maybe we can get some of the rascals. Who knows but what we may kill one apiece? Wouldn't it be fine if we could?" he added, with a cheerfulness that was little less than astounding. "Don't suppose you ever killed a man, did you?" he inquired.

"No, I—I never did," I answered, shuddering as his cold-blooded way of asking the question.

"Well, watch out now, and maybe you'll get a chance before long. Makes you feel a little queer when you knock over the first one; but by the time you've laid out as many as I have, you'll get used to it. Keep your eyes open now!"

He returned to the front side of the cabin. I sat listening and locking, ready to shoot instantly if an opportunity offered. I didn't care to kill anybody, not even one of the dreadful cattle-men. A shot in the air would answer all my purposes. But the sound of footsteps—or whatever they were—came no nearer, and I had no occasion to use the six-shooter.

Again an hour or more dragged its slow length by, and again, after the excitement died out, I began to grow drowsy. Feeling confident that there had been a false alarm, I finally resumed my position on the bed.

Before I was aware of having fallen asleep, a terrific explosion tore the air almost over me—an explosion that seemed loud enough to lift the cabin roof!

Up I leaped, frightened half out of my senses. My ears were still ringing with that report. The shepherd was standing near me, quietly reloading his gun.

"What's the matter? What did you shoot at?" I cried out in the dark, excitedly.

"Sh!" was his warning. Then he whispered: "He was crawling up, but I was too quick for him. He thought he had me that time, but he'll never trouble me any more."

"What! Did you hit him?"

"Yes, I laid him out. Don't you see him kicking out there?"

I put my eyes to an opening, and could certainly make out a body lying several yards away. It was barely distinguishable in the dark, but I could see it jumping and jerking convulsively, as if in the throes of death.

A strange feeling of horror, impossible to describe, crept over me as I watched that prostrate form till it became motionless. Indeed, I could scarcely keep my eyes away from it. But the shepherd seemed not in the least disturbed by the deed he had committed—the taking of a life.

"What made you go to sleep again?" he whispered. "If you'd

kept awake, you might have killed that fellow, instead of me. But maybe you'll get one yet. I'm going back to my own side. Hope I can knock over another rascal there."

Again there was a long silence, and again, in spite of that motionless, lifeless body stiffening out there among the bushes, I lay down on my rude bed and slept—slept the sleep of weariness.

Once more I was awakened by an unusual noise, very different from the roar of the old army musket, however. So sleepy was I that, though partly awake, I had been listening to the sound for some time, as it seemed, before I could realize what it was and where I was.

Now I sat up. The cabin-door stood wide open, and the moon had risen till everything outside was in plain view. In front of the cabin stood the shepherd, with his head thrown back, singing with all his might. In the still night-air his words must have been audible a mile or two away.

He was just finishing something as I woke up. Now he began on another verse. The words were very distinct:

"I comb my head with a curry-comb,
I grease my boots with a bacon-rind;
I grind my teeth on a big grindstone;
My claws are long as a punkin-vine!"

These words, shouted out, almost bellowed out, at the top of the singer's strong voice, had a strangely grotesque sound; so much so that I half believed myself still asleep and dreaming.

After pausing for a few moments, the singer started up something else:

"Go tell Aunt Nancy—
Go tell Aunt Nancy—
Go tell Aunt Nancy
The old gray goose is dead!"

At the end of that verse, Groves went first to one corner of the cabin and then to the other, as if looking for his enemies. Then he planted himself in front of the door again, and again he began to sing:

"I'll eat when I'm hungry,
I'll drink when I'm dry;
If a limb don't fall on me
I'll live till I die!"

These silly words, shouted out so vociferously, would have sounded ridiculous under different circumstances; but they had no such sound to me now. In fact, a strange, creepy feeling of horror stole over me as I sat there on the buffalo-robe and grass, listening to them. For I knew well enough what they meant: the shepherd was crazy—as crazy as a loon! The persecutions of his enemies, and perhaps remorse for all the lives he had taken, must have driven him insane.

CHAPTER V.

A SONG IN THE NIGHT.

NOW, even more than before, I wished myself a thousand miles from this uncanny creature and his cabin. No telling what he might do. But for the fact that he was standing in front of the door I should doubtless have tried to slip out and steal away. But before I could decide upon any course of action the shepherd took another look around the corner of his cabin, then began to sing again.

The contrast between this song and his others could scarcely have been greater. Those, with their silly words, were shouted out loudly, boisterously, almost with insane vehemence; but this song was sung with such expression and feeling as affected me strangely. Both the words and the air I had never heard before; nor have I ever heard them since. Perhaps the shepherd had composed both; for, in spite of some crudities of speech, he was an intelligent fellow, and, I think, a born musician.

Most of the words I have forgotten, but the beginning of the refrain was: "I'm far, far from home." It was the heart-broken plaint of an exile, homesick for the home to which he dared not return.

I have heard some famous singers since, but never one that seemed to me to sing from the heart as this man did, and never a song that affected me as this song did. Perhaps my surroundings, and what I had learned and guessed of the hermit shepherd's life, may have had something to do with it; but, as I sat and listened I could scarcely keep the tears out of my eyes. Such was the pathos pouring out with the exile's words.

Verse followed verse, and until the song was concluded I scarcely moved. When he had finished the shepherd sang no more, but stood motionless, gazing far away. Before I had been a little afraid, not knowing what the fellow might take it into his crazy head to do. But now I felt that, however insane the man might be, there was, for the present at least, no violence in his insanity.

Laying the six-shooter aside I stole to the door and stood watching him. At last, when he did not turn, I worked up courage enough to speak:

"What are you doing out there, Mr. Groves?"

He spun round instantly. "Oh, it's you, is it?" he exclaimed, in relieved tones. "I'd forgot you were here. When you spoke I thought the cattle-men had come back. But I might have known better. They never show their heads after the moon rises. They only come when it's dark—pitch-dark, the scoundrels! They know what's ready for 'em if they come about when I can see. I was singing to—did you hear me singing? I was just singing to let 'em know I'm not afraid of 'em. That was what the first songs were for. When they hear me singing like that they know I'm not afraid, and it makes the scoundrels shiver. Yes, sirree, you'd better believe it makes 'em shiver! And they go sneaking back to their holes."

"Yes, they've all gone back now," I said, thinking it better to humor him. "Why don't you come in and sleep awhile? You've

been up all night. It's my turn to stand guard now. Come in and lie down, and I'll take your place."

"Think you can keep 'em off if they all come together?" he inquired, somewhat doubtfully.

"But they won't come now that the moon's up," I reminded him.

"Why, yes, of course. I'd forgot about the moon." He turned and gazed at it. "Sure enough, there it is. Well, maybe I'd better sleep awhile."

He went inside and stretched himself on his bed. I was hoping he had gone to sleep, when he rose to his elbow and said:

"Did you hear that last song I sung?"

"Yes. Did you sing that to the cattle-men, too?"

"No," he answered, scornfully. "What would they know about such a song as that? I never cast pearls before swine. I was singing that to the folks at home. It has been a year or two since I heard from 'em. I used to write when I first came out here, and they wrote to me. But I got afraid—afraid somebody else might read the letters; and so I don't write any more. But sometimes in the night, when I'm too restless to sleep, I go out and sing 'em that song—the song you heard me sing. But I'm afraid they don't hear it. Two thousand miles is a long, long way. Do you think they could hear it as far as that?" he asked, appealingly.

"Well, sound carries a good distance on a still night like this."

"That's so," he said. "But it would carry farther if the wind came from the west. Maybe it will be blowing from the west by tomorrow night, and then I'll sing it to 'em again. If they're asleep and can't hear it maybe they'll dream they hear it. Almost every night I see them in my dreams and talk to 'em."

He lay down again, but soon came to the door.

"You haven't found that spotted ox of yours have you? That's because you've not looked in the right place. I happened to glance through a crack just now, and saw him first thing. Yonder he is!" He was pointing straight at the moon.

I turned and gazed in the same direction. "My eyes are not as good as yours," I finally answered.

"Well, now, that's strange. I can see him as plainly as I see you. His horns sprouted feathers and turned to wings, and he flew up to the moon. And the man in the moon has yoked him up and gone plowing with him. Strange you can't see that."

"Oh well, no matter," I answered, carelessly. "It serves the old rascal right for running away. Let the man in the moon plow with him as much as he pleases. You go back and get some sleep."

The shepherd returned to his bed, and this time he remained there. I sat down on a door-sill and waited. At last his regular breathing told me he was asleep. That was what I was waiting for.

My saddle was lying by the house, and I took it up, as noiselessly as possible, and started. Vic was at my heels.

As I passed round the cabin, something impelled me to turn aside and take a look at that lifeless form. The moon had crept round till part of the corpse was now in the light. I gave a frightened start and a half-gasp at the sight of a long, grayish beard. The slain cattle-raiser must have been an old man. But the next moment I breathed freely again. I had seen the face above the beard. It was the face of a goat—the Billy-goat that had been stalking about near the milking-pen. Poor Billy was stone-dead! His insane master had given him a fatal bullet.

While hurrying on in search of my pony I was almost laughing, so great was my relief at learning that no human life had gone out there that night. "That loony sheep-man has got blood enough on his hands," I reflected.

The pony found and saddled, I lost no time in mounting and riding away. This had been a horrible night to me—the most horrible of my life—and very glad was I to escape from the sheep-ranch and its crazy hermit shepherd.

By the time I had regained the road day was tinging the eastern sky. More than once during the night I had half decided that if I ever got safely away I would take the back track and go straight home. But now, the danger escaped, my courage had revived, and without hesitation I started on after the runaway.

My plan was to keep riding till I came to a house; and then, after informing his neighbors that the shepherd had become a lunatic, I would determine what to do next by the information received there.

Rapidly I rode, and the sun was just peeping over the horizon when I looked down into a valley and discovered a farm and a neat-appearing farmhouse. A boy and a girl, both bareheaded, were in the stake-and-ridered cow-pen, milking. I rode up to the pen.

The boy, who was tall, light-haired and fair-faced, and not much older than myself, came over to the fence.

Scarcely had I mentioned a spotted ox with unusually long horns, when the young fellow broke in:

"Yes, that steer is here now. That is, he's close around somewhere. We found him lying at the gate day-before-yesterday morning when we came out to milk. He went off with our cattle, and was here again yesterday morning. My sister and I noticed him on account of his horns. And we noticed him still more closely because we knew he didn't belong around here. He has taken up with our cattle. You couldn't run him off. But they failed to come home last night—our dry cattle, I mean. But your ox went off with them, and he's still with them. They're all somewhere close around. Have you followed him far?" he inquired, with friendly interest.

"Seventy-five or eighty miles. This is my third day out from home."

"Your third day! You are having a chase of it. Where did you sleep last night?"

"I didn't sleep, to speak of. I spent the night a few miles back on a sheep-ranch, with a wild, raving lunatic. The night before I camped with a mountain-lion, and managed to get along fairly well. But sleep was out of the question last night."

"So you stayed with Sam Groves, did you? I know the fellow, but I'd rather not spend a night with him, if you please. Guess you had a time of it."

"I never spent such a night before, and hope I may never again," I replied with some feeling, memory of my recent experiences being still vivid.

"What did he do, anyhow?" the young fellow inquired, eagerly. And his sister left off her milking and came over to the fence to listen.

I related some of the night's happenings, and concluded by saying:

"The fellow is crazy—as crazy as a loon. Remorse for all those lives he has taken has driven him insane. The blood of seven human beings on one conscience is too much for anybody to stand."

The boy smiled as he answered:

"Sam Groves is about half-crazy, as you say. But it wasn't remorse that upset him. If he ever hurt anybody in his life it was before he came here."

"Then what made him tell me he did?" I demanded, in amazement.

"Oh, that's just one of his insane delusions," spoke up the girl quickly.

"That's right," said her brother. "He hasn't killed anybody yet;

but he may if he keeps on shooting around at night, like he's been doing for some time. He's wounded a yearling steer and a horse for the people in this settlement, that we know of; and no telling how many others that nobody knows of yet. People that know the fellow is wrong make it convenient to keep away from him. But if a stranger was to ride up to Sam's cabin at night he'd stand a fine chance to get his head shot off."

"It's a wonder he didn't take a shot at me," I remarked.

"Not if you went there in daylight. That's the strangest thing about him. He has crazy spells after dark, but in the daytime he's all right, as least so far as anybody can tell."

"If it wasn't remorse that drove the fellow crazy, what did?" I wanted to know.

"Herding sheep—being so much alone," said the girl. And her brother added:

"Sheep-men have a saying that six years of steady herding will get the best man 'a little out of fix up stairs,' especially if he lives a hermit's life. And Sam has been at it longer than that, he says. He sticks to it so closely, too. Every day in the year, cold or hot, rain or shine, those sheep must go out to grass. Once in a long while he takes half a day off to ride somewhere that he has to go. But even then he hurries back as if his life depended on it. Unless he drops the sheep business and goes at something else no telling how crazy he will get. Cattle-men don't like sheep, because no other animal likes to graze after a sheep. There are some cattle-men here, and every settler has cattle; and Sam has got an idea from somewhere that they're all down on him, and would like to run him out. But it's just a delusion of his."

"Do you mean to tell me there wasn't any danger last night?" I demanded, incredulously. Such a thing had never occurred to me before.

The young fellow smiled. "Not from the cattle-men—no more than there is this minute. Sam did have some trouble where he came from, I understand. Somebody stuck a few warnings on his door, and Sam rounded up his sheep and traveled. But there never has been the slightest trouble where he is now. He has a flock of several hundred head; but there's plenty of grass for them and all the other stock here, and a good deal to spare."

"But get down and hitch your pony. You're at the end of your hunt now. After breakfast I'll saddle up and ride out with you, and we'll soon bring in your lost ox."

The girl now left off her milking and hurried away to the house. I dismounted, turning Dick loose to graze, and climbed over into the pen to help with the cows. There were still three to be attended to. While I roped the calves and pulled them off, the young fellow did the milking. We talked all the time, and when the last cow was stripped and her calf turned loose we had arrived at a very friendly footing.

His name was Frank Booth. The family had come here from Missouri three years before. They owned a good farm here in the creek valley, and better improvements than most of the settlers.

"My sister and I are alone just now," he explained. "Father and mother left home nearly two weeks ago to visit our married sister, down close to Waco. We're expecting them back tomorrow or next day—don't know just when."

We now started for the house, Frank carrying one bucket of milk and I the other. He took the buckets into the kitchen and left them on the table. After washing, out by the well, and getting ready for breakfast, we entered the principal room of the house and sat down.

The girl soon appeared at the door to announce that breakfast was ready, and we passed out into the room which was both dining room and kitchen.

"Stella," Frank said, "this is Travis Holloway. He used to live in Bates county, Missouri. Bates joins Henry on the west, you recollect. It was the only county between us and the Kansas line."

The girl came to meet me with a friendly smile and a warm, firm handclasp, that I have never forgotten. She was not quite fifteen, and though not large was as tall as she would ever be. In appearance she was in marked contrast to her big, light-haired brother, both her eyes and her hair being dark. The most noticeable thing about her was her alert, wide-awake look. While not at all bold in her ways, she was more friendly than timid. Her face, viewed from the standpoint of my nearly seventeen masculine years, was very attractive to the eye.

"And so you're another Missourian," she said smiling up at me confidently. "As we're from adjoining counties, I almost feel that we've been neighbors, and are acquaintances already."

"No, I'm not quite a Missourian," I had to tell her. "I happened to be born in Texas. But my father and mother came from Missouri, and we've been back there since. We lived there four years, and most of my mother's relatives live up there somewhere—those that don't live in Kansas or Iowa or Illinois."

"Then you're a Texan, a sure-enough Texan, are you? Most of the people one meets here were born somewhere else. Oh, I know! They named you Travis for the hero of the Alamo, didn't they?"

"That's right. I was named for Colonel Travis, the commander at the Alamo."

"I've read all about him, in the History of Texas," cried the girl, her dark eyes shining. "Only I pronounced his name with the a long—Trayvis—instead of the short sound you give it. I can't forget those words: 'Thermopylae had its messenger of defeat; the Alamo had none.' Wasn't it grand—and awful? Are you as brave as your distinguished namesake? He died rather than retreat or surrender."

Remembering how badly frightened I had been the night before, at nothing, I looked down.

"No, I'm not," I had to answer. "I'd be a failure at the hero business."

The girl and her brother laughed, and we sat down and went to eating.

During the meal it developed that we three had one ambition in common—to get an education. Good schools were very scarce in this part of Texas at the time. But in a little town over on the Brazos two brothers, both ministers, both fine scholars and fine-looking men, and both young and full of enthusiasm, had opened a mixed school. Though its age was less than half a dozen years, so many young men and women had flocked to it that it now numbered several hundred students and nearly a score of teachers, and its reputation had covered the big state.

Frank and his sister had a catalogue from this school, and so had I. And we were all planning to enter it just as soon as we could. The fact that we expected to meet again, put us at once on the friendliest terms.

CHAPTER VI.

FRIENDS AND A FELLOW TRAVELER.

FRANK BOOTH was an easy-going, good-natured fellow, not quite eighteen years old, and brighter out of books than in them. Stella, though three years younger, had already outstripped her brother in some of her studies. And, like myself, she had read everything she could put her hands on in this country of few books. She was not only remarkably bright and wide-awake but a bundle of energy and ambition. Their plans for getting an education were, I soon found, mostly of her making.

I myself had not been in school for almost two years; but I had read Aesop's Fables and Roman History in Latin, and knew some algebra, a little geometry, and a little—a very little—Spanish. Neither of my new friends had ever studied any language except their own; and the fact that I had explored some of the mysteries of a strange, dead tongue gave me a standing with Frank and Stella Booth that would have been hard for me to attain otherwise.

"We had planned to enter school this fall," Stella said during the meal, "but father thinks now that he won't have money enough to send both of us. I wanted Frank to go alone—he's so much older than I am, and of course has more need to be in school. But he won't go without me. Says he must have me with him, to spur him on to study hard."

"She's a pretty sharp spur," spoke up Frank, smilingly.

"No sharper than I ought to be—for you," she answered, smilingly also. For they were very courteous to each other, this brother and sister. "Then I proposed that we both go, and economize by renting a little house and boarding ourselves. I could do the work for two, and never miss the time. I even wrote to President Clark about it, and he wrote back that two or three of the girl students did that very thing last year—kept house for themselves and their brothers. I was just wild to go. I've read of plenty of men that worked their way through college, but never of a woman. Though I can't see why girls shouldn't do that kind of thing just as well as boys."

"They could—they all could if they were as work-brittle as my sister Stella," Frank remarked.

"Oh, I like to work! I like to make things go!" cried the girl. "I can stand anybody but a lazy somebody."

"No insinuations, if you please, ma'am," interrupted her brother.

"Oh, Frank's not lazy. He would be, just a little bit, if I'd let him, but I won't. Of course I won't. I'd make life a burden to him if he were half as lazy as some people I know. But I've got off the subject. As I was saying, I wanted to go to school and keep house, but father and mother have decided that we'd better wait for another cotton crop. And we expect to have some cattle to sell next fall, too. Then we can go as boarding students and have nothing to do but mind our books. Father says, 'One thing at a time. Work when you work and study when you study.' But I can do both; or could if I had half a chance. When do you expect to go?" she inquired of me.

"That all depends. For awhile I counted on getting off this fall

—this coming fall. When I gave that up, I thought I could start next year without fail. But now I don't feel even half-way sure about that."

"Oh, what a pity—what a great pity!" said Stella, sympathizingly. "It would be so nice if Frank and I could meet you over there—so much better than going among utter strangers."

"Oh, I'll be there sooner or later. You can drive a nail into that," I assured her. "I expect to go and keep going till I graduate, if it takes me fifteen years."

"That's the way to talk!" cried the girl, enthusiastically. "If Frank would only talk like that! But I do wish you could go next year, when we do. Why can't you?"

"Well, you see, it's this way," I explained. "When we moved up to the Little Pecan Creek country, father had money enough to buy all the land he cared for, and a few hundred more to improve it with. But he wanted the best land; and the piece he picked out was part of a big survey—a tract of about seventeen hundred acres. The owner lived away down in south Texas. But father was so eager for that particular piece of ground that he drove eighty miles to Waco—that's our nearest railroad. There he took a train and went to see the owner. The man was willing to sell the whole tract, but not part of it. He was willing to sell for part cash, though; and rather than miss getting the land he wanted father planked down all the money he had, and signed notes and a mortgage on the land for the balance. So we've got a big tract of good land, but we're nearly two thousand dollars in debt. Our crop's on new ground, and won't turn out much this year. I doubt if we can pay the interest on what we owe—at twelve per cent.—without selling our cattle. Part of the principal has to be paid each fall, too. The man has already agreed to postpone this fall's payment. But that means a double payment for next fall; and father says he can't see how we're going to meet that and the interest, let alone finding money for my schooling."

"Why don't you sell off the land you don't need?" inquired Frank.

"Father did sell a little of it, to some people we knew near Austin. They came a few weeks after we did. But he had to sell that on time. He'd be glad enough to get rid of the rest—all except the five hundred acres he wants to keep. But there's nobody to sell it to yet."

"Maybe some new settlers will come in this fall and buy all you have to sell," suggested hopeful Stella.

"Yes, maybe they will—I'm hoping they will; but I'm afraid they won't," I answered. "You see, it's a long, long way to a railroad, and people don't usually plunge so deep into the backwoods. They don't like to wagon their cotton so far to market. That's one thing that makes me so glad to find my ox. Work-cattle are high, and it took every cent we could rake and scrape to buy Lep and Coaly. But we had to have them to break new ground with."

"Have you no other team?" Frank inquired.

"Yes, father has a team of horses, but they're rather light for such heavy plowing. We've got a big lot of new ground to break this fall and winter, but you can't buy another ox—another yoke of oxen it would be. People won't usually split a team. But without a heavy team we can't get much new ground broken; and without the new ground we can't put in much of a crop; and without a big cotton-crop we can't hope to meet the payments and interest on our land. So we'd stand a fine chance to lose both the land and all the money father paid on it. Then we'd have to pull up and roll out somewhere and start over again. And it would be years and years

before I or my brother—he's five years younger than I am—before we could hope to see the inside of a school room. I mean a good school. We've got some neighborhood, log-house affairs, where the children learn to spell a little and read a little and cipher a little."

"So there was a great deal depending upon your overhauling that spotted ox, eh?" Frank remarked, thoughtfully. "Well, I'm glad your hunt has turned out all right."

"So am I," declared Stella. "But I should think you'd be afraid to work such a great-horned, fierce-looking fellow as that."

"Afraid of Lep! Why, you could look Texas over without finding a milk-cow gentler or better natured than he is. I can handle him from his head to his heels. I can crawl under him or over him, or do anything else I want to with him. Instead of trying to hurt anybody with his long horns, he always turns his head slowly and cautiously when I'm close to him for fear of hurting me accidentally."

"You can't judge by appearances," observed Frank.

After breakfast—and a good breakfast the young cook had set before us—Frank and I went out into the cotton-field and carried in some big ripe watermelons, which we stored away in the milk-house to keep cool. Afterwards we unsaddled Dick, and Frank insisted upon giving him a liberal feed of corn and oats. While the pony was eating we went to the orchard and gathered a basketful of fat, red-cheeked peaches.

We had intended to ride out before dinner in search of the cattle. But the day was now growing sultry, and when Frank proposed that we wait till the afternoon I readily agreed. After that we busied ourselves with shelling peas, peeling peaches and similar work.

Stella gave us a good dinner, with peach cobbler for dessert. She rose high in my estimation as a cook; and rose even higher by feeding Vic abundantly, without being asked. Frank and I helped to wash and wipe the dinner dishes. After that we all sat on the front porch and talked. By this time we were calling one another by our first names, and were as well acquainted as if we had lived together years instead of hours.

So congenial were we that Frank now proposed that, instead of starting home with Lep next morning, I should remain with him and his sister for a few days. I objected that I ought to get home as early as possible, to begin plowing; but Frank insisted that I ought also to give my pony a rest before starting back. Stella joined her persuasions to his, with the result that I consented to remain at least another day.

As soon as the shadows began to grow long and the weather cooler, Frank saddled a horse and I my pony, and we rode out in quest of the cattle. They were not so easily found as we had expected, and it was well on toward night when we came upon them, in some scattering woods.

"Here they are at last!" my companion sang out, on catching sight of the little drove.

"But Lep—he's not here," I replied, gazing around blankly.

"Oh, he's close about somewhere," Frank assured me.

"But we could hear his bell."

"He may be lying down. It won't take us long to scare him up."

But after scouring all the surrounding woods for an hour, we had convinced ourselves that Lep had abandoned his recent companions and started on his travels again.

"The sly old rascal!" I exclaimed, irritably, on learning that he had escaped. "I'll make him pay for this when I get him yoked to a plow-beam again. And the worst of the trouble is nobody knows whether he's been gone two hours or two days."

"That's so," answered Frank, soberly. "We ought to have started

out early this morning, instead of waiting. Then we might have found him. But never mind! We'll nab him yet before he travels many miles. I'll ride with you tomorrow morning, and it won't take us long to strike his trail and track him down."

"I'd like to have company, Frank, but I'm not going to put you to as much trouble as that."

"Oh, don't worry about me," was the cheerful reply. "I could live in the saddle this fine weather. Guess it was my fault, too, that you missed your ox. Believe we'll drive our cattle home as we go."

We rounded them up and started, but Frank soon made another discovery. Two of his cattle, a yearling steer and a two-year-old heifer, were missing.

"I recollect now," he said. "Those two animals acted like they'd fallen in love with your ox. Maybe they admired his horns, and hoped to grow some just like them—no telling. Anyhow, they kept hanging around him like two little boys around a big one. And there's only one conclusion: they've followed him off. There are three runaway cattle now instead of one."

"That's right. And it's a pity, too, Frank. I'm sorry to miss Lep, but sorrier to have him leading your young cattle astray."

"Oh, rest easy about that, Travis. I interded to go with you anyway, and now I have to go. It's all the same. If Stella had somebody to stay with her—but I can arrange that. There's a young man and his wife living just below us on the creek. I'll get them to come up for a night or two, till we get back or the folks come home. We'll have those runaways back here in three or four days at the longest."

"Don't be too sure about that," cautioned I, grown wise from experience. "That old longhorn of mine is a traveler. And he seems to have an instinct for eluding pursuit."

"Well, three or four days or three or four weeks, we'll camp on their trail till we run them down," declared Frank.

"Now that's too bad—too bad!" exclaimed Stella, when told that the three cattle were gone and must be followed. "It will spoil your visit."

"Not a bit of it," spoke up her brother. "It will only postpone it. He must spend at least a few days with us after we get back."

"Yes, we shall expect you to stay, and get acquainted with our father and mother," said his sister. "I'm glad of one thing: it won't be so lonely for you, now that Frank is to keep you company."

"No, but you'll find it very lonely here, I'm afraid."

"Oh, one doesn't get lonely at home. There are too many things to do and think about, and books and papers to read. And mother will be at home with me in a day or so, and father."

"I'm going down to get Tom Jones and his wife to come up and stay with you at night," said her brother.

"Huh! What do you want them to stay with me for? What will hurt me? I'm not afraid of the dark!"

"No, of course not. But it will be lonely here for you at night, and I want you to have company."

Scarcely had Stella learned that her brother and I expected to be off next morning, when she fell to cooking us a supply of eatables to carry with us. Various things that would keep several days she prepared, till Frank had pretty well filled a pair of capacious saddlebags which he proposed to take. Besides these he would carry a slicker, and he had laid us out a blanket apiece.

"Look out that you don't load us down with one thing and another," I warned him. "If you do we may never overtake those cattle this side of the Rio Grande."

"We can make better time by carrying a full commissary department, I think," he answered.

That night I penned a letter home, borrowing paper and envelope and stamp for the purpose from my new friends. After detailing my experiences up to date, I explained that Lep was not far ahead, and that from here on I should have a traveling companion. I also assured father that I would drop him a line every time I came to a postoffice.

This letter Frank carried down and left with the people that were to stay with Stella, to be mailed.

We fed our horses well that night, and were up long before daylight to feed them again. By the time there was light enough to see we had eaten our breakfast, girted on our saddles and were ready to start. As he was tying the saddle-bags behind his saddle, Frank showed me a big-mouthed, dangerous-looking six-shooter that he was about to stow away in their lighter end.

"It might come in pretty handy, and we'd better have it with us," he remarked. "When we first settled here the Comanches raided the country a few times, and this is what father carried. Sometimes he would let me wear it, and I always felt very important when I got it buckled around me. It's against the law to 'tote' it in a scabbard now in this country. But the law says that a traveler may carry it in his saddle-bags or other baggage. I know that because father is justice of the peace here. This is not a very good six-shooter. It has seen better days. But it's a deadener just the same."

As we were starting, Stella proposed to keep Vic till our return, and I readily consented. "That is, if she will stay with you," I explained.

"Oh, she likes me and I like her, and she'll stay all right—never fear about that. She's a nice little thing. But to make sure, I'll shut her up till you're gone. Then she'll have to stay."

She took the little dog into a room and left her there, closing both doors and windows securely.

"A short journey and a prosperous one!" the girl called after us from the front gate as we rode away, waving her good-bye.

Before we had got out of sight of the house there was a crash and the jingle of broken glass behind us, and a minute later Vic came running, with some slight cuts on her nose. She had jumped through a window pane.

"Oh, never mind the glass," Frank said, when I had stopped and turned. "We've got a spare one or two. It's not needed now. I'll putty it in when we get back."

"I got Vic five years ago in Missouri, when I was a small boy and she was a little puppy," I explained. "She doesn't know what it is to stay away from home unless she's with some of the family."

We now struck the road we thought Lep had probably followed, and were soon riding it at a brisk gait. There were numerous cattle tracks in it, and we felt practically sure that some of them had been made by our cattle.

"A good deal pleasanter to have company on a hunt like this—don't you think so, Travis?" Frank remarked, not long after we had got well under way.

"Yes, it is that—ever so much pleasanter," I answered heartily. "But my old longhorn has brought you a lot of trouble."

"No, he didn't," Frank protested. "I like trips of this kind. And to tell you the truth, it's a wonderful relief to find somebody that has an ambition to do something besides turn his hat up behind and down before, and wear high-heeled boots and spurs and spit tobacco. That's the kind of boys we have around here—mostly. Stella

has two or three ardent admirers of that kind, and when I tease her about them she gets so mad she'll hardly speak to me. They like to station themselves where she can see them, and then go pegging about on their high heels with their spurs jangling to attract her attention. Sometimes she laughs at them, but usually she scorns to see them. With their boots and spurs they imagine themselves dead-shot lady-killers."

I laughed at his description. That type of young man was altogether too common.

Houses were far from plentiful, and we halted at every one to make inquiries. At length we found a man who had seen Lep and his two younger followers pass.

That was the day before, however. If they had traveled steadily, they must have a pretty good start of us by now. We pushed on till noon, then halted for dinner. But we were in the saddle again as soon as our horses had grazed and rested.

An hour later we came to where the road forked, one branch leading south and the other southwest. The number of tracks here prevented us from trailing our cattle; but we thought it probable that they would travel southward. So we turned our horses' heads in that direction.

Two or three miles farther on we found a settler and questioned him. Lep and his traveling companions had not been seen here. Still we pushed on till we had passed two more houses.

Having heard nothing, we now became convinced that this was the wrong road, and we turned back. A few miles brought us to the forks of the road, and we started out on the other fork.

We passed no houses now, but at one place we made out the tracks of three cattle in the road. This discovery encouraged us to push on.

The day had been warm to sultriness, and late in the afternoon a black cloud rose slowly in the west and northwest.

"They're having a big rain over there somewhere," Frank remarked as we rode along. "That must be up about the head of the Cowhouse River."

Higher and higher crept the cloud, till an hour before night, the sun went out in thick gloom. The muttering and grumbling of distant thunder could now be heard sometimes.

"That's beginning to look like a storm," I observed, turning in the saddle to gaze at that inky mountain of blackness.

"Yes, very much like a storm," Frank agreed. "We may have a bad night. I like to camp out in fine weather; but such a night as this promises to be I'd rather have a board or two over me, thank you. Hope we may discover a house about camping time."

Heartily I echoed the wish, and we pushed ahead. The country seemed utter wilderness here, and no sign of a human habitation appeared.

CHAPTER VII.

STORM-BOUND IN THE HAUNTED CABIN.

AT last we met a horseman, and stopped him. "No, I didn't meet no cattle travelin' along the road, he informed us, in reply to our inquiries. "But I do recollect seein' a spotted steer lyin' in the shade, a good piece off to one side. He had long horns and wore a bell, and there was some other cattle with 'im. I didn't pay much attention to them, though."

"That's Lep and company; no doubt about that, I guess," Frank remarked to me.

"Where did you see them—how far back?" I inquired of the horseman.

"Oh, sever'l miles—I don't recollect. It was durin' the heat of the day."

"And whereabouts on this road shall we find a house?" Frank wanted to know.

"Must be ten or twelve miles to the first one anybody lives in."

"Is there an empty house closer—one that we could find shelter in if the storm comes down on us?" I said to the man.

"Yes, one. That's five or six miles back. It's half a mile west of the road. But you can see the roof if you look close. You won't want to spend a night in that, though, I guess." The fellow grinned.

"Why not?" demanded Frank.

"Because—well, everybody says it's—ha'nted. They call it the ha'nted cabin. Nobody that knows the place would stay all night there for love or money. It hain't been lived in for years and years. Never was lived in much."

"Oh, we'll stay there if we don't find a better place. The ha'nts won't bother us, and we won't bother them," laughed Frank.

"But why do people say the place is ha'nted?" I wanted to know, curiously.

"Had enough to make it ha'nted," the horseman replied. "It was built some fifteen years ago; and less than a week after the settler moved into it the whole family was murdered and scalped by the Comanches. Bloody endin' they come to."

We were both much interested, and Frank said:

"Seems to me now I'd heard of that place before. What kind of ha'nts do people see there?"

The man laughed a shivery laugh. "Some think they see one thing and some another. But it's mostly what they hear that scares 'em into fits—screams and groans and yells and sech like. Enough to make a feller's hair stick straight up, they say."

"Did you ever spend a night there?" I questioned.

"Ever spend a night there? Well, I ruther guess not. Not for five hundred dollars I wouldn't. I don't hang around no ha'nt-dens much any time, I can tell you, let alone at night."

He rode on his way, and we ours. Higher and higher climbed the cloud, and thicker and thicker deepened the gloom. At length we looked off to our right and could make out the roof of a house, barely distinguishable among the tree-tops.

"Yonder's the famous ha'nted cabin!" exclaimed Frank. "Glad

we got here while there's light enough to see it. No time to lose, either. Bad storm brewing, or I'm a false prophet."

The deeper gloom of night was already settling down, and the utter silence that goes before a storm was in the air as we road up to that cabin in the woods.

"Gloomy old place, that," Frank remarked. "If there was any other shelter within reach, don't know but I'd vote to give this the go-by. But I'd rather run against a whole caviyard of ha'nts than to get a soaking."

"Same here. It's the ha'nted house or the storm, and I choose the ha'nted house every time. Here goes!" I swung myself out of the saddle.

Frank did the same. "Of course that ha'nt story is all stuff," he declared, rather loudly, perhaps by way of propping up our falling courage. For in the gathering gloom there certainly did seem to be something grewsome about the place. I did not reply.

We had dismounted at the end of the house, and now lost no time in stripping off our saddles.

"What makes these logs so black?" Frank suddenly burst out, walking up to the wall. But after rubbing his hand over them, he added, wonderingly: "Why, they're charred—burnt. Somebody must have been trying to set fire—"

He looked at me and I looked at him. Both of us had guessed, what we afterwards learned to be the truth. The savages, after murdering the family, had piled brush against the end of the house and tried to burn it; but the logs, being green, had refused to take fire. The charred wall remained, and would remain while the cabin stood, a black reminder of the black deed enacted here.

Neither of us spoke of the matter again. Somehow the discovery had produced a depressing effect on our feelings.

The house was in the woods, but rank grass grew among the trees, and crowded close up to the cabin itself. We selected the best spots we could find and lariatd our horses there, as close to the house as we could get them. Then we walked around the uninviting structure.

It contained two rooms. One, the larger, was built of logs. The other, a side-room or lean-to, had been made by nailing boards—rived clapboards—to upright pieces. In one gable-end, near the rough-stone chimney, gaped a good-sized hole.

"Not a very cosy shelter, but a long-shot better than none," Frank observed. "But we'd better get inside. I felt a drop of rain just then. This storm can't hold off much longer."

Taking up our saddles and other things, we went around to the open front door. Vic had been inside, making a tour of inspection, and now came to meet us.

It was already dark within, and before entering Frank struck a match and held it up.

Most deserted houses lose everything that can be carried away, such as floors and doors and windows. But this place's history and uncanny reputation had protected it. The floor, which was of puncheons, or hewn slabs, remained as it had always been. There were no windows. The shutter for the front door was off its wooden hinges, but it was lying inside, and we afterwards replaced it. A loft of puncheons, supported by big joists, hid all but one small patch of the roof, and the hole in the gable was not visible inside. A wide fireplace occupied a large part of one end. Dirt and leaves littered the floor. The room was rather large and very gloomy, and the corners and the fireplace and the under side of the loft were a black tangle of spider-webs.

The match went out, and Frank struck another. As he did so,

there was a whirring and flapping of wings overhead, whether of owls or bats, or both, we could not tell.

A shutterless door connected the two rooms. The lean-to had no floor but the ground; and the winds had swept it half knee-deep with dead leaves. An open door led out of it on the far side. After a hasty view, for the duration of a match, Frank said:

"Not a very inviting place to spend a night."

"Looks like there might be scorpions and centipedes and—and spooks around here," I answered, shivering. "No wonder the old house wears a bad name. Let's kindle a fire. That'll liven things up a little, maybe."

An occasional drop of rain was spitting the roof, but the long-threatened storm had not yet begun. It was now almost as dark outside as inside; but we went out and groped around a few minutes, then came back with our hands full of sticks and brush. The fireplace, as well as the old chimney itself, was almost choked with spider-webs and the trash that had lodged in them; but with a roar the flames soon swept them clean. Now we put up the shutter and closed the front door. The firelight scattered the gloom, but seemed powerless to banish it altogether.

Frank's saddle-bags were soon open between us, and though our surroundings had depressed our spirits they had not depressed our appetites.

The storm was still holding off when we began our supper. We talked of everything but "ha'nts." For some reason neither of us cared to allude to them again.

In the midst of our meal came a roaring among the tree-tops outside, and almost at the same time big rain drops began to patter on the roof. Slowly they spattered the clapboards at first, then faster and harder, harder and faster. Presently both of us gave a frightened start. Something had struck the roof a resounding whack.

"What was that?" exclaimed Frank, turning a startled, puzzled face toward me.

"Somebody must have hurled a stone," I replied.

Soon another stone-like object smote the clapboards, then another and another, all with deafening violence. Now the storm burst upon us in its fury.

"Hail!" shouted Frank, leaping to his feet. "Come on quick! We're in for a hail-storm."

Out we both rushed into the darkness; and though the water and ice pelted us frightfully, we soon had our horses safe in the shelter of the shed-room. There we had to stand and hold them to keep them quiet; for the lightnings were now gleaming and the thunders crashing constantly, and the pelting of the hailstones on the roof had turned to a thunderous roar. Soon the lightning-flashes showed the ground white outside with deepening ice.

The roof, old and rotten as it was, proved a good one; and though the hail must have split many of the boards, but little water came in.

Soon the hail slackened and ceased, but the rain kept falling in floods. Now we fastened a stick across the door of the lean-to, and left our horses inside. Having rekindled our fire, we finished our supper. The hail had chilled the air.

For an hour after supper we sat around our little fire, waiting for the rain to stop, till all our gathered sticks had burnt out. We had intended to lariat our horses on the grass again; but the rain kept up its steady patter on the roof, and we left them where they were.

"If we wake after the rain holds up we can take them out then," Frank remarked, while we were crawling into our blankets. "Otherwise we shall have to graze them a while in the morning."

Once afterwards I was half awake, but the rain was still beating its soft tattoo on the roof, and to its music I marched a double-quick into dreamland again.

It was Vic's fierce growling, almost in my ear, that finally aroused me. Now I became conscious of something or somebody moving about a few feet away. And while I was wondering what it could be the most blood-freezing, unearthly scream or shriek that had ever startled my ears rang out in the very room with us.

Both Frank and I were on our feet instantly, wonderfully wide-awake now.

"Did—did you ever hear the like?" Frank whispered, half gasped.

"No, I never did—in all my born days I never did!" I whispered back. "It must have been that—that—that thing."

We stood still and listened. Again something or somebody began to move about over the puncheons, just where we could not tell. It had been easy in broad daylight to declare our disbelief in "ha'nts." But here in the pitchy darkness, with those mysterious noises close by, and that awful scream ringing in our ears, our disbelief was very seriously shaken. Vic, backed up against me, kept growling, but in a badly frightened way. Putting my hand down to quiet her, I found every hair on her slim little body standing erect, from anger. And I have a strong suspicion that the hairs of my head may have been doing likewise—from a very different cause.

"What could it have been, Frank?" I whispered. But he did not reply. Those mysterious movements had begun again. Then, suddenly, that same blood-curdling scream started up again. And scarcely had it started when another one joined in, and then others, all in the same room with us!

That was too much for our overstrained nerves. With one accord we started for the door.

"Let's get out of here!" I cried.

"The quicker the better!" shouted Frank.

And even before that medley of shrieks and screams had died away we had found the door, torn it open and rushed forth into the rain and darkness!

A hundred yards I fled, with my hands held before me to ward off unseen trees. The darkness appeared solid. How much farther I might have run in my panic is uncertain, but I was suddenly stopped by plunging headlong over something.

"Frank, where are you?" I shouted, under the impression for the moment that the ha'nts had seized me, and that I might need assistance to break loose from them.

"Here I am!" he called back, from thirty or forty yards ahead. Like myself, he had not been letting the grass grow under his feet. "What's the matter, Travis?" he called again, this time coming in search of me.

But now I was on my feet and had learned what had happened.

"Nothing serious," I replied. "I just ran over a tree or log or something, and turned a few somersets. What was that—that—those awful things, anyhow?"

"Sounded like—like the people the Comanches murdered."

"Yes, it did," I agreed with him. Our excited imaginations were equal to anything just now.

"Reckon it could have been the ha'nts that fellow told about?"

"I—I—don't—don't believe in ha'nts," was my reply, through teeth that would persist in chattering. We were bare-footed, and the rain, still falling slowly, sent a chill through me.

"Neither do—did I. But what else could it have been, Travis?"

That was more than I could tell him. So we groped our way to—

gether, then stood still in the rain and the black night, waiting and listening and shivering. Our horses could be heard snorting loudly. Vic, who had followed me, sometimes barked, and sometimes reared up against me and whined anxiously. Still we stood and listened.

Strange sounds were issuing from the old house. Soon they grew louder. Here Frank uttered a half-angry, half-disgusted exclamation.

"What a pair of silly cowards we are!" he burst out. "It's just animals—some kind of woods 'varmint.' Don't you hear them fighting?"

He was right. Two or more animals could be heard, in furious combat. The battle finally came to an end, but they kept snarling and spitting at each other. Whether they were wildcats or panthers, or what they were, we could only guess.

"But how did they get into the house?" I wanted to know. "The front door was shut, and—"

"They might have come in through the shed-room," Frank suggested. "Oh, if I just had my old six-shooter and a light!"

The rain, slowly though it fell, was soaking us through and through, and we groped our way toward the cabin. The unknown "varmint" were still quarreling noisily, growling and screaming and hissing by turns. After drawing near where the house was believed to be—we could not catch the faintest glimpse of it—I made a discovery:

"Frank, they're not in the big room at all; I mean down where we were. Those sounds come from the roof. The things must be up in the loft."

"That's just where they are! They crawled in at that hole in the gable-end. Good hiding-place for them up there. The hail or rain drove several of them in, and they're fussing for possession. They were screaming at one another when they scared a couple of gumps half out of their senses."

"And wholly out of their shelter, which is even worse this kind of a night," I shivered.

"Something's got to be done," Frank announced. "I don't want much more of this. I've got a match or two in my pocket. Let me see if I can strike one."

He stood in the door and scratched the match on the inside of the log, but all his matches were damp and missed fire. The quarreling was still under way up stairs, and he finally stole in, groped about till he found the saddle-bags, then sprang back to the door with them. Now we were in possession of both matches and a formidable weapon.

The six-shooter he put into my hands. "Be ready when I strike a light," he whispered. "Might be a panther in there."

I grasped the weapon eagerly, and felt my courage rise with a bound. As the match flared up, the noises in the loft ceased instantly. Cocking the six-shooter, I stepped inside, ready to do battle, if necessary, to regain possession of our shelter. But the animals we had heard, whatever they were, were all in the darkness of the loft.

Our wood had all been burnt and the fire had gone out; but there were plenty of leaves in the lean-to, and we brought in some and started a blaze in the fireplace. Not knowing what might be over our heads, we moved about noiselessly, and spoke only in whispers. Vic, with her eyes fixed on the loft and her sharp little nose sniffing the air, kept growling angrily, her hair straight up.

"Travis," Frank said, as soon as we got our fire started, "we can't stay in here with that pack of varmints up there. We don't know what minute a panther will jump down on our heads. We've either got to move out into the rain and give them possession, or drive them out."

"I've had all the soaking I want for one night," I answered, feeling of my dripping clothes. "We'll rout them out."

"But how?"

I flourished the six-shooter. "What's the matter with this? It's big enough to knock over a buffalo or a grizzly."

"Rather risky business, tackling panthers in such close quarters," he objected. "I can shoot pretty well with a gun, but no telling what I'd hit with that old concern, especially if I got a little nervous. And it's more dangerous to wound a panther than to miss him. Are you a pretty good revolver shot?"

"Ought to be. I was born where every man went with from one to three of the things buckled around him. I could shoot my father's six-shooter when I was five years old. Usually I can drive a nail at twenty or thirty steps."

"Can you? Good! Then you must do the shooting. I'll hold a light for you."

Now we began to discuss ways and means. There was but one opening into the dark, cavern-like loft, and that was at the end, at one side of the fireplace. It was about two feet and a half square. The only way I could think of was to climb up the wall till my head was above the puncheons, then hold to the logs with one hand and shoot with the other.

"But that old blunderbuss is too heavy. You can't hold it steady with one hand," objected Frank.

I agreed with him, and he suggested something else:

"I'll tell you, Travis. You get on my shoulders and let me hold you up. Then you'll have both hands free to shoot with."

The suggestion seemed a good one, and we made hasty preparations to carry it out. Taking some paper from the saddle-bags, he tore and twisted it into tapers. Then he squatted down, and I got astride his neck, with a leg on each shoulder.

"Now be ready," he said, still in cautious tones, as he struck a match against the floor.

My only answer was the tick-tick of the big six-shooter as I pulled the hammer back.

When the paper began to blaze Frank started to rise up with me. That he could easily do; for he was a broad-shouldered, well-muscled fellow, while I, though rather tall, weighed scarcely a hundred and forty pounds. But he suddenly dropped down again.

"I forgot something. Whatever you do, Travis, keep both hands back of the cylinder. That old thingamabob sometimes lets off two or three barrels at a pop."

Most of the old cap-and-ball six-shooters would do this after their tubes got burnt out, so that the caps did not fit closely.

"Risk me to keep behind the thing," I answered.

"And you'd better not hold it too close to my head, either. I don't want to be powder-burnt. And whatever you do, don't wound one of the varmints, especially if they're panthers. Shoot to kill. Ready now!"

Again he rose up, slowly, this time till my head was above the loft. It was like a cave up here, and at first I could see nothing at all; but the darkness snarled and growled at me with a chorus of frightful voices. A breath of wind fanned my neck, coming in at the hole in the gable, not far from my back. Then, steadying himself, Frank reached up the light.

For a moment or two the whole loft seemed spotted with fiery eyes. Then, as the blazing taper itself came above the puncheons, I was more than startled to see four good-sized animals of prey in the back part of the loft!

One, the largest, which I recognized as a panther, was crouching on the floor, as if for a spring. But the light, flaming suddenly in his eyes, had blinded and frightened him, and he had started back. Behind the panther, in a corner, stood another animal, a big wildcat, and over in the other corner crouched two more wildcats.

There was not a moment to lose. My hands shook from excitement as I aimed the six-shooter at the panther's head; but I gripped the handle hard to steady them, and sighted at a point between the eyes. The taper had nearly burnt out before I got a satisfactory aim, but those eyes were still glowing like live coals, and I pulled the trigger.

Instantly the whole loft seemed on fire, and heaven and earth crashing together around me!

After that I seemed vaguely conscious that the house was falling to pieces! And a wild, fierce scream rang in my ears as some of the animals rushed by me, making for the hole in the gable!

CHAPTER VIII.

CUT OFF BY A WALL OF WATER.

A FEW moments later I was down on the floor, with the smoking six-shooter still in my hand. Frank was putting leaves on the fire, and Vic was barking. The beating of hoofs could be heard in the distance. The air reeked with burnt powder.

"What happened, Frank? I thought the house was blowing up."

"Did sound like it, Travis. And I could have made oath I heard some of it fall."

"Why didn't you tell me I was to shoot a cannon?" grumbled I, as I stooped down and began to examine the weapon by the light of the blazing leaves, turning the cylinder with my fingers. Presently I straightened up. "No wonder!" I exclaimed.

Frank looked up at me questioningly.

"Every barrel went off at once! With six bullets crashing through it, it's a wonder the house didn't tumble to pieces."

"And what did it do to the varmint you shot at?"

"That's what I'm going to find out."

"Better reload first."

He got a little powder-horn, some bullets and a box of caps out of the saddle-bags; and while he fed the fire with leaves, I reloaded three barrels.

"Now we're ready to investigate the loft," I remarked. "I can't hear anything up there."

"No. Guess they've all escaped by this time—those not shot or scared to death. You light that piece of paper and hold it up, and I'll climb the wall."

Up he went, and I held the blazing paper high.

"What do you see, Frank?"

"Nothing alive." He took the paper out of my hand and held it still higher. "But there are two dead varmints up here. One's a panther, and the other looks like"—he moved the paper about—"like a big wildcat. And that's what it is." He climbed down. "Pretty good for one shot, Travis."

"One shot, do you call that? I'd call it a volley. Why, I ought to have killed all four."

"You would, I guess, if you'd had them all in range, like you did those two. But we'd better see about our horses. Think I heard them running off. They must have got out. That was enough to scare them out of their hides."

Sure enough, both horses were gone. In their panic they had plunged through the narrow door, perhaps at the same time, and had knocked down the rotten outer wall and run over it.

"I thought I heard something falling," said Frank. "The rain has about stopped. Guess we'd better stir out and try to round them up while we can."

I took a look outside. "It's terribly dark. Why not wait till morning?"

"Well, Bob might be somewhere close by when daylight comes, but he's more likely to be twenty miles on the road toward home. And as we're situated now, the loss of a horse would prove a serious matter."

"Yes, it would—mighty serious," I admitted, thoughtfully.

"Must confess, though, that I don't know how to go about finding them, dark as it is now. We might pass within a dozen yards of them without suspecting it."

"No, we won't," I told him. "If I can get within calling distance of Dick, he'll answer me every time."

"Will he? That's good! Then we'd better get out right away."

Before starting, however, we found a few dry sticks to kindle with, then put on our boots and slickers and brought in some wood from outside—enough to make a good fire in the fireplace. Then we lost no time in getting out after our horses.

We had left the door open, that the light might guide us back. But before we had gone twenty steps the darkness was like pitch. We groped our way along, holding our hands before us. All the time I was calling Dick at the top of my voice.

Presently I heard a crash, and Frank, a few steps ahead of me, uttered a half-startled, half-frightened exclamation. Then came a splash, seemingly from the depths of the earth.

Believing that something dreadful had happened, I stopped suddenly.

"What's the matter, Frank?" I called out.

"Matter enough!" came back, seemingly from far away or from far down.

"Where are you?" I called again.

"I'd like to know myself! I'm in some kind of a hole. Better look out! You may tumbled in on top of me."

"Are you hurt?"

"No. But I'm in water up to my arms. This must be an old well."

And that was just what the hole proved to be. Years before it had been covered over with rails or poles, to keep anything from tumbling into it. But these had become rotten with age, and when Frank stepped on them in the dark they had snapped like twigs and let him drop through. The place had been a veritable pitfall.

Cautiously I approached, feeling every inch of my way. Just how deep the well was we could not tell in the dark. But undoubtedly Frank was several feet down.

"If we just had a rope!" I exclaimed. But the only ropes we had with us were trailing from the necks of our horses. Rapidly I studied the situation.

"Wait a minute!" I called out. Hurrying back to the cabin, I found our bridles, and after fastening their reins together, returned and let them down into the darkness.

"I can hear them hitting the bank up there somewhere," Frank called up. "But they're not half long enough."

Again I returned to the cabin and came back, this time with half a dozen blazing sticks in my hand. The rain had now ceased, and I kindled a fire for light, on the very brink of the old well.

"That looks cheerful up there!" cried Frank. "Wish I could start up a fire down here, to warm this water."

"Anyhow, we can see something now," I answered, as I moved round to the other side, where I could look down. The light fell poorly, but I could make out Frank's head and shoulders, set in a background of water, twenty or twenty-five feet below.

Again I tried the bridles, to see how much too short they were. Then I ran to the house and brought all our girths—there were two on each saddle—and after fastening them together and to the bridles lowered them into the well. By lying flat on the bank, and reaching as far as I could, I got the lower end of my improvised rope within a few inches of Frank's fingers. But even if he could have reached

it, it would have been impossible for me to pull him out, heavy as he was; nor could he have held on long enough if I could.

"Can you think of anything else, Frank?"

We discussed every plan that seemed even half-way possible. Among them was the cutting of an "Indian ladder"—a long pole with short limbs left on it. But that would require an ax.

"You can't get me out of here without a rope," was Frank's conclusion; and mine as well.

"Then I must find our horses. Can you stay here till I make a round, Frank?"

"That I can," he replied. "In fact, it's the only thing I can do just now. But find them as soon as possible, Travis. This water must have run in after the hail-storm, and it's chilling me faster than I'm warming it."

Frank rose suddenly in my estimation. I have always loved cheerful people.

"Never fear, I'll get you out!" I called down, rather rashly perhaps. "A fellow that can joke after taking the tumble you took, and after being in ice-water as long and as deep as you've been in it, is too valuable to lose."

I started off at a run, but soon got beyond the circle of light and had to move cautiously. As I advanced I kept calling, so loudly that the woods rang with it: "Co'up, Dick! Co'up, Dick! Co'up, pony! Co'up! Co'up!"

After getting so far away that I was in danger of losing the light, I began to circle about it. And as I circled I kept calling, anxiously calling, tremulously calling.

Having made what seemed to me a complete circle, without receiving the slightest reply, I had almost concluded that I should have to return without a rope. But to go back and tell Frank that I had failed was little less than dreadful. So I pushed out farther into the darkness. At length my perseverance was rewarded by hearing a faint nicker.

As fast as possible I groped my way toward it, and finally came upon Dick. The other horse may have been near, but I did not hear him, and I could see nothing at all. Even the firelight was no longer visible. Leading Dick, I groped my way toward it till it glimmered through the trees. Then I moved faster.

"Here I am! And here's a rope, Frank!"

"Good for you, Travis!" came up, more cheerfully than could have been expected, out of the gloomy hole.

The rope was quickly let down. It reached well enough; but drawing Frank up, without windlass or pulley, proved a practically impossible task. And when he attempted to climb the rope, after I had secured it to a tree, he was no more successful.

"My hands are too numb to grasp it," he said, the first note of discouragement in his voice.

"Tie it fast around your waist, and I'll have you out before you can wink twice," I called down, as I started for the house at a run.

When I came back, my saddle was in one hand and a big punch-eon under my other arm. The puncheon I threw across the well. And I was careful to smear one edge with wet clay, to keep it from wearing the rope. Then I clapped the saddle on Dick. The girths were off, and a minute was lost in getting them in place. But they were soon fastened hard, and I bridled Dick, tied the end of the lariat to the saddle-horn, and sprang into the saddle.

"All ready below?"

"Wait till I find my hat," came from the well. Then a minute later: "Pull ahead!"

"All right! Hold hard, and up you come!" I shouted, as I started Dick straight away from the well.

It made the little horse pull, for Frank was a solid fellow. But the lariat slipped rapidly over the muddied puncheon, and soon a wet, bedraggled, unrecognizable head thrust itself up into the firelight."

A minute or two later I had my soaked, half-frozen traveling-companion in the house, steaming before the fire. And I kept lugging in sticks and chunks and short logs till the fireplace, big as it was, was roaring like a furnace.

In spite of his long-continued ice-bath, Frank, wrapped in a cloud of steam, was still able to joke.

"It was an unlucky day for you when my runaway ox stopped to lick at your salt-log," I remarked.

"Not a bit of it," he disputed heartily, loyally. "This don't amount to much, thanks to your promptness in dragging me out. But suppose the same thing had happened to you when you were alone. You might have soaked in there till you died."

"That's true, Frank, true enough," I answered, soberly.

After getting his clothes partly dried, Frank stripped them off and hung them before the fire on some sticks, while he himself crawled between our blankets to sleep. I piled fresh fuel on the roaring, crackling heap, and was soon sleeping by his side. The sun was shining when we awoke.

Up we sprang, eagerly. I was feeling remarkably fresh and vigorous. Frank's clothes were dry, but stiff and yellow with clay. He declared himself none the worse for his unlucky experiences of the night.

We dressed and hurried out in search of his horse. The storm itself had utterly disappeared, and the hail had all melted, but its ravages were visible everywhere. Most of the leaves were beaten off the trees, and here and there we noticed a dead bird.

"It will surprise me if we find Bob," Frank remarked, when we were well out in the woods.

But we did; and that before we had gone a hundred yards farther. The trailing lariat had got caught in a root and held the horse fast, though it left him free to graze.

"Well, now, wasn't that a lucky accident?" exclaimed Frank. "If we'd had to make a trip back home, those runaway cow-brutes would have got a long start of us."

After breakfast, thinking it prudent to let our horses graze a little longer, we climbed up into the loft and threw down the dead panther and the dead wildcat. Vic sniffed around them suspiciously.

"Do you suppose those varmints were hiding up there when we first came in last night?" asked Frank, after we had inspected them.

"No, I know they were not," was my answer. "Vic would have scented them instantly. They'd been up there before, I've no doubt, and the storm drove them to shelter."

"Yes, that must have been the way of it. But we've got to skin them. Nobody will ever believe you killed both at one shot if we don't have some proof. We can leave the skins at the first house, and get them as we come back by with the cattle."

"All right," I agreed. And we soon had the dead animals stripped of their hairy coverings. The skins we tied behind our saddles, the carcasses being thrown out for a breakfast for the buzzards. A little later we were riding on our way.

After a mile or two we found some new cattle-tracks in the road, and felt hopeful that our runaways might have made them. Our horses were fresh, and we pushed on rapidly.

At length we came to a house—the first house since the deserted one—and stopped to make inquiries.

"Yes, them very three brutes passed here not more than an hour ago," the bearded settler informed us. "They was follerin' the road, like they knowed whur they wanted to go. And they was trampin' a good, steady gait, too. You ought to overhaul 'em somers over about the river. Camped out last night, did you? Must have had a rather lively time."

"No, we didn't camp out, but we had a lively time just the same," laughed Frank. "We spent the night in that old house, a few miles back."

"What! Not in the ha'nted house?"

"That's the place."

"And what did you see?" The settler came closer.

"Oh, we saw sights," Frank assured him.

"But what did you see—and hear? Did any of the ha'nts show themselves?"

"Indeed they did," I spoke up. "We saw four, and we killed two of them and skinned them."

The man stared at me in hopeless, incredulous bewilderment.

"That's right," endorsed Frank. "We've got the proof here with us." He related our experiences with the wild animals, and displayed the two skins.

The settler was greatly surprised. "Well, now, I wonder if that's what's been scarin' folks clean out of their wits all these years. It might have been, or it might have been just their imaginations—who knows? I never did take a great sight of stock in them wild tales."

The man readily agreed to take care of the skins for us till our return, and we left them with him. After talking a few minutes about the dreadful event that had occurred, so long before, at the deserted house, we rode on.

"Well, our chase is nearing its end," my companion remarked, as we trotted along. We were out on the prairie now. "It has been a rather short one, but we had a lot of fun while it lasted."

"Yes, it seems to be about over. Old Lep can't well dodge us any longer now," I agreed. "But he would if he had half a chance."

Every time we turned a rise we expected to catch sight of our cattle. But we had still not discovered them when we looked down into a valley and saw the timber of a stream, which we knew to be the Cowhouse River.

"Wonder if it will be up," Frank was saying, when our ears detected a faint roar.

"Shouldn't think it would be much, yet, but that sounds like it," I replied.

The noise seemed all in one direction—up stream. We rode faster. Our horses pricked up their ears and gazed toward the roar, which kept growing louder. Soon, wondering, we struck a gallop.

The Cowhouse is a deep, swift stream—deep as to its channel—with a rocky bed and high, rocky banks. Much of its course, if not all, lies in a broken, half-mountainous country. On the near side, at the place we were approaching, there was no timber, the prairie terminating in a high, overhanging bank.

As we reined up near the edge of this bank, the first sight that greeted our eyes was our three runaway cattle, just emerging from the stream at the farther side. The river, which was about a hundred and fifty yards wide here, was slightly swollen, and the water extended from bank to bank. But it was not deep; Lep and his companions had waded it.

Eager though we were to overtake our cattle, we little more than noticed them as they climbed the farther bank. For that roar, coming from somewhere up stream, had swelled deafeningly, alarmingly. Our horses pranced about and tried their hardest to run.

We kept staring toward the awful sound, and our eyes were soon rewarded with a sight that made our hearts stand still.

"A head rise! A wall of water!" shouted Frank, excitedly.

And that was just what we saw coming. Around a bend in the river it rolled, with a voice of thunder, foaming, boiling, raging, roaring! From bank to bank it stretched, and it must have been six or eight feet high. Save where it foamed, it looked an angry black.

CHAPTER IX.

WATER BOUND ON THE COWHOUSE.

ON swept the wall of water, resistlessly, raging in its might and fury. We watched it with fascinated eyes. Soon it had rolled by, and not long afterwards it disappeared around a bend below. Behind it the river was a mad torrent.

"I'd heard of walls of water before, but that's the first one I ever got a glimpse of!" cried Frank. "I wouldn't have missed it for a ten-dollar gold-piece! A regular water-spout must have turned loose somewhere above here last night."

"Well, we're completely cut off from our cattle."

"That's just what we are," he replied. We stood gazing across the dark, angry river toward where the three objects of our search had stopped in the shade of a big tree and were unconcernedly chewing their cud. "So near, and yet so far! Isn't it tantalizing?" he exclaimed.

"Tantalizing's no name for it, Frank. Why did we gab so long with that bearded fellow? Five minutes sooner we could have forded this stream easily. Now the only way to cross is to swim."

"Excuse me from swimming that river today, if you please."

Dismounting, and hitching our horses to bushes, we walked down the road to the water's edge. The river, we soon discovered, was rising very fast—a foot every four or five minutes. Vast quantities of driftwood kept floating by, bobbing up and down furiously. Brush, logs, trees, rails, cornstalks and similar objects half hid the troubled bosom of the stream. Evidently the valleys and valley-farms above were already flood swept. Several wash tubs went hurrying by, as if running away guiltily from their accustomed drudgery.

So fast did the water climb that it kept us retreating up the bank before it. An army of lizards, spiders and other creeping things, routed from under stones by the advancing flood, were also making a panic-stricken disordered march up hill.

"Rise fast, fall fast. Soon up, soon down," observed Frank.

"But it won't be fordable before morning," I told him. "And no telling how many miles more old Lep and your yearlings will put behind them by that time."

"Can't be helped, Travis. No ferry-boats along here, I guess, and they wouldn't dare run if there were any. So there's no chance to get across till this big rise runs out. We might as well go into camp and possess our souls in patience."

"Just watch Lep looking across at us," said I, a little later. "I half believe he's laughing to himself over the shabby trick the river played us."

"Waiting to get across, are you, boys?"

We turned quickly. A man was standing on the bank above.

"Yes. And we seem likely to have a long wait of it," I answered, grumblingly.

"Where you bound for?" the man wanted to know.

"We're bound to catch those three cattle over yonder, as soon as the river gives us permission," Frank replied.

The settler came down, and we three stood together, discussing the flood. He lived half a mile above.

"Well, boys, let's go up to the house," he soon invited, hospitably. "You're not likely to get over today, and maybe not tomorrow. Come up and stay with us."

"Much obliged to you, sir," replied Frank, "but I think we'd better camp here somewhere. We want to keep an eye on those cattle over yonder."

Lep and his followers were lying down now, in the shade. From time to time the spotted fellow would turn his head and gaze across at us with mild curiosity.

"Won't do a bit of good to watch 'em," the settler answered. "If they want to pick up and mosey on, you can't help yourselves."

"No, that's what hurts," I admitted, in an irritated tone. "If we just had that old spotted rascal tied to a tree over there, we wouldn't mind waiting."

The settler looked thoughtful. "Tell you how we can work that," he said, presently. "See that house on the hill yonder? Jim Edwards lives there. He's got a calf-pasture of ten or fifteen acres. If we can catch sight of 'im, we'll motion 'im down; and then if we can once make 'im understand, he'll look after your cattle for you. Clever fellow, Jim is."

This seemed an easy solution of the difficulty, and we gladly walked down with Anderson—that proved to be our settler's name—till we were opposite the house. It stood two or three hundred yards back from the river. But, as it happened, both Edwards and his wife were on the farther bank, viewing the fast swelling flood.

The river was still roaring loudly, and not till the three of us had nearly torn our throats shouting did we succeed in making the people on the other bank understand what was wanted. But when once the man did understand, he readily agreed to hold our cattle in his pasture till we could cross over and get them.

As we three walked back toward the road, Edwards walked up the south bank to where the cattle were lying. Driving them up, he started off with them, and we watched till they had all disappeared among the thick timber of the bottom land.

"Thank goodness, we've got them safe at last!" I exclaimed. Now we can rest easy till the river runs down."

Frank and I proposed to camp near the road; but Anderson insisted that we at least go up close to his house to camp.

"I see another cloud getherin' up t'wards the head of the river. If it keeps on rainin' up there, you may have to hang around here several days."

So, leading our horses, we walked up with him. But we stopped under a big live-oak on the river bank. Here we established our camp, where we could keep watch over the stream's risings and fallings. Anderson invited us to the house, which was very close by; and when we declined with thanks, he urged us to take our meals there. We assured him that we still had plenty to eat, but he made us promise to come over for supper.

I was on the point of asking him if he could lend us some fish-hooks to while away the time with, when he remarked:

"I've got to go grubbin' myself. Got half a dozen big live-oak thickets up yonder above the field to dig out, and this wet weather is the best time to do it. Want to put in several acres of new ground by spring. I've been tryin' to hire help. I've set three or four men to work, but they don't stick more than a day or two. Grubbin' is the hardest work in the world, I guess; and rootin' up live-oaks is the hardest kind of grubbin'."

This interested me. Idleness was something I was little accustom-

ed to. And, incited by my empty pockets, I was especially eager to earn some money.

"Here's a boy that won't shy off from live-oaks," I told him. "I've been clearing ground, off and on, for about a year, and I'm up to the work. What will you pay me to grub for you while we wait?"

"All depends on what you can do. If you can clear as much land as I can, I'll give you a dollar a day and board. Or if you'd like to grub by the job, I'll give you so much for a thicket, accordin' to its size."

"Frank, you can look after our camp, can't you? I left home without a cent; and I didn't have any money there to speak of. I'd like to earn a little while we're water-bound here."

"Wouldn't mind turning an honest dollar myself," replied Frank. "I'll go up with you."

After unsaddling our horses, and lariatting them out on the grass, we hung all our things on live-oak limbs, out of reach of the hogs running about. Then we went out to the house, where Anderson armed us with a mattock apiece.

The land to be cleared was a prairie valley, spotted over with big live-oak thickets.

"I'll give five dollars to have that one grubbed out," the settler remarked, on coming to the first thicket.

"Show us something smaller," I said. "Put us on one that we can clean out by noon tomorrow."

"Why not pitch into this, Travis?" spoke up Frank. "It won't take us a great while to finish it."

"But our cattle—what can we do with them while we're working?"

"You can cross over in the mornin' and get 'em, and keep 'em in my pen," suggested Anderson. "I ain't got any pasture fenced, but there's plenty of cottonseed and green corn you're welcome to feed 'em."

"That's good enough!" I assured him. "Now to work!"

We were soon swinging our mattocks; and slowly, very slowly, the live-oak bushes went down before them. The hail-storm, though miles from here, had cooled the air, but our faces were soon wet and dripping. All the rest of the day we stuck to our hard task.

By noon the river had risen twenty-five or thirty feet. It was flooding all the bottom-land on the other side, and the lower part of the valley we were at work in. But not long afterwards it began to run down, dropping more slowly, however, than it had come up. Just at nightfall, when Frank and I walked down to the road to examine it, there seemed good reason to believe that it would be fordable by morning. But a black cloud was piled up in the northwest, and all night long the electric fires flashed and flamed in it. And when morning dawned we were not greatly surprised to find the water higher than on the night before. And it kept crawling up.

So Frank and I went on with our grubbing. We took our meals at Anderson's, and worked early and late and hard. By the second night we had finished our thicket; and very promptly we received our money.

"Now guess I won't have to beg stamps and postal-cards when I want to write home," I remarked, as I pocketed my two dollars and a half, and felt much better for having it.

The weather was fine here, but up the river rain kept falling daily, and one flood followed close on another's heels. One night, I am pretty sure, the water fell low enough for deep fording. But by morning it was booming again.

Once we went down to the point opposite Edwards' house, and calling him to the river by signals, we inquired about our cattle. He

shouted back that they were still in the pasture with an abundance of water and grass, and that they could stay there a month or two longer, if necessary. Then we returned to our work.

Having finished our first thicket, we spent half a day fishing, then started in on another and larger thicket. This was a longer job, but it paid us a dollar apiece more than the first one.

During this time we had written letters home, and sent them to the nearest post office by one of Anderson's neighbors. In them we explained that we had overtaken our cattle and had them safely fenced in; and that we expected to start home just as soon as the high water would let us cross over and get them.

After finishing our second thicket we tried fishing again, then came back and took a contract to grub up a third thicket. We had now been here a whole week, and still the river was too deep to ford. But as we were making fair wages, and had no anxiety about our cattle, that did not worry us greatly.

One night, however, we went to the house to find some news awaiting us.

Anderson's little boy, who had been down the river fishing, came running home to tell his father that Edwards had shouted something across to him. All that the little fellow could understand was the word "cattle."

"Boys, that must be something about your big steer and the two yearlings," Anderson said, turning to us.

We both agreed with him; and soon we were all hurrying down to see if we could get in communication with Edwards. For some reason a strange misgiving kept tugging at my heart. Edwards was still on the river-bank, and we quickly learned what he had to tell us.

Our cattle, he shouted across, were out of the pasture and gone. He tried to explain how they came to escape, but that we failed to understand. However, it made little difference.

"How long have they been gone?" I yelled.

"Since night before last," came back, rather faintly.

I was thoroughly angry at Lep. "The tricky old scoundrel! Can we never get hold of him?" I exclaimed hotly.

"He seems pretty hard to put your fingers on," observed Frank, rather glumly for him.

"That settles it!" I declared, as the three of us turned and walked back through the gathering dusk toward Anderson's. "No more hanging around here for me! I've got to get across this river first thing tomorrow morning."

"But how can we cross, Travis?" protested Frank. "The river is as high as ever, and as dangerous as ever. I don't see anything to do but cultivate patience and wait."

"Wait!" I exclaimed, impatiently. "Frank, if that old longhorn had your hopes of getting an education tied to his tail, as he has mine, and a lot of other things with it, the very word wait would drive you frantic. No, we've waited too long already. I've got to cross somehow, and strike out on that old rascal's trail, if I have to swim over and then foot it. Once let him get another long start of me, and I might as well sing, 'Good-bye, Lep!'"

CHAPTER X.

RAFTING ON THE COWHOUSE.

ON our way down to interview Edwards we had noticed a covered wagon approaching the river from the north; and on our way back to Anderson's we saw that the wagon had camped a hundred yards or so from the bank. Near it an old couple, man and wife, were eating their supper by a little camp-fire. Evidently they were waiting for the river to run down.

The night that followed was an anxious one for me. Before falling asleep Frank and I discussed every plan we could think of, practicable and impracticable, for reaching the south bank. There were no ferry-boats, either above or below. And, as it happened, an unexpected rise, coming when the river was low the spring before, had carried off all the skiffs along here. The nearest one left was six miles above.

"The simplest way to cross is to swim," Frank observed, as we lay on our blankets, gazing up at the starlit sky.

"If Dick was ever in swimming water I don't know when it was, Frank. He might go it all right, or he might not. Father was a cowboy when he was a young fellow, only a little older than we are. He was part of an outfit that tried to take twenty-five hundred longhorn steers from Texas to California. They never saw California, but they marched thousands of miles, and swam rivers by the dozen. He says there's a world of difference in horses. All of them can swim, of course; but some swim well naturally, and some don't, especially with anybody on their backs. And the only way you can find out about a horse is to try him."

"Well, the Cowhouse is not just the kind of a stream one likes to experiment in," answered Frank.

"It's anything else. And a horse is an excitable animal. They sometimes drown themselves. I believe Dick could swim all right. He's a sensible little fellow. But he's too light to hold me up in the water. If I could swim by his side, or hang to his tail, it wouldn't be so bad. But to sit up in the saddle—I wouldn't dare to risk it."

"And even if you did swim by him or tow behind him, how could you guide him?"

"There's the rub, Frank. I couldn't guide him; at least not in such a stream as this."

"No, I guess not. What Bob would do in the water I don't know. He's bigger than your pony; but then I'm a good deal heavier than you are. It would make me feel shaky to try to swim the Cowhouse on him. I'm only a passable swimmer myself. In fact, I wouldn't dare risk it."

"A boat's what we need, and a boat we've got to have, Frank. Then we can pull across, and let our horses swim after us."

"Yes, a boat's the thing," agreed Frank. "And the wisest course for us is to strike out up the river tomorrow morning, and keep on the move till we find that one Anderson told us about, or some other."

With this understanding we fell asleep. We were up before daylight next morning, and went down to examine the water. But the stream was still far too deep to ford.

We told Anderson what we had decided to do, and he approved of it as being safer than attempting to swim the river on horse-back.

He was going to town, and we wrote two hasty letters home, and sent them by him to mail. In them we explained that our cattle had escaped and were gone again, and that we were about to follow.

Just as the sun was rising we said good-bye to the Anderson family and rode up the river. Anderson had paid us all the money due for grubbing and his wife had stowed away a new supply of provisions in one end of Frank's saddle-bags. Our horses were well rested by this time, and we took up the chase again very hopefully.

But a mile up the river we happened upon something that caused us to change our plans.

In a very low place in the valley—a sort of pocket from the river—back-water was standing. When the river was high many logs and rails had been thrust out into this pocket by the stream. And here they remained, floating in the shallow water.

As we were riding around this place, Frank suddenly reined up.

"Travis, let's not go a step further. It's six miles up to that boat and six miles back—a twelve-mile trip. The boat's on the other side, and the owner lives a quarter of a mile away, Anderson said. If we don't happen to find him down at the river, and the chances are we sha'n't, we'll have to keep riding till we happen onto a boat on this side. And that may be six miles further—or sixteen—or sixty. And even after that we'd have to double all the way back here to strike the trail. So let's hop off right here and—"

"And do what, Frank?"

"Make a raft. Plenty of logs here for a good one. A raft is better than a boat, too, for a swift stream like this. It can't upset, and it can't sink—unless you load it to death."

"But I wouldn't know how to handle it."

"Risk me to show you that. One of my uncles lives near the Osage river in Missouri. He and his boys used to make rafts of sawlogs in a big creek. When the creek got up they'd work the raft out into the Osage, and then several miles down that to a sawmill. I helped take three or four down while I was there on visits. Finest fun in the world, too. We can manage a raft all right. Of course we can!"

He was so enthusiastic over his new plan that I quickly caught some of his enthusiasm.

"If you'll ride back to Anderson's and borrow an ax and an auger, I'll pick out the best logs and get them together," he proposed.

I readily consented; and when I returned with the tools, Frank had the logs in position and ready for the cross-pieces.

"At first I planned to make a little raft," he explained. "But these logs are nearly all long, and it would take a lot of time to chop them in two. So I've decided that we'll use them full length. The thing will be a little clumsier to manage, but it'll be safer. And our ponies can swim behind a big raft just as well as behind a little one."

With boots and socks off, and his trousers rolled as high as possible, he was down in the shallow water, putting the logs in position.

I now felled a small tree close by, and between us we split it in half. These timbers we laid across the logs, one at each end, and flat side down, and bored holes and pegged them there.

"With as big a raft as this, what's the use making our horses swim?" I wanted to know.

"Hadn't thought of that. Guess we might as well ferry them across and save them the exertion of swimming. Why yes, we can do that. Of course we can; and we will."

Now we filled in the hollows between the logs with rails and sticks, so that Bob and Dick could walk over them better.

In a clump of woods on the river-bank we cut two slender poles, each about fifteen feet long.

"All ready for business—for navigation!" cried my friend, as we laid the poles on the raft.

While Frank attended to various small matters I carried the tools back to Anderson's. When I returned he had the raft against the bank, at a suitable place, and called on me to lead the horses aboard.

Dick smelt the logs and snorted several times, but gave no serious trouble. Frank's horse was more stubborn, and a quarter of an hour's coaxing was necessary before he would take the venture. But when once on, both stood in their tracks in the center of the raft, too frightened to move an inch. Vic was scampering about over the logs.

Frank now set his pole against the bank and pushed off, and we had started on our voyage. As we poled the raft through the still backwater, nearer and nearer to the swift, angry, angrily muttering river, it must be confessed that I grew not a little nervous. And when we had pushed out into the stream, and the current had seized the heavy raft and was running away with it, as a mud-bottom cat runs away with a fisherman's cork, I was badly frightened.

Frank, however, showed no signs of alarm, and profiting by his example, I soon shook off most of my fears.

"Yonder's the landing point I'd picked out," he said, pointing down the river to a sloping place in the south bank. "I don't know whether we can stop there or not. Let's try though."

We thrust down our poles full length, but without touching bottom.

On sped the runaway raft, at dizzying speed, and the place where we had hoped to land was soon left behind. Now even Frank appeared a little dismayed.

"Don't just like the looks of things," he admitted. "No telling how far we may drift before we find another landing-point on that side. Wish my pole had grown a few feet longer. But let's keep feeling for bottom."

Again and again we stabbed the turbid stream with our poles, but nothing solid could we reach. The banks now stood up like walls on both sides; but even if we had seen ever so many landing-places, they would have availed us nothing. The raft was utterly beyond our control. We were riding a wild steed without bridle or halter.

"Maybe the river will grow shallower farther down," Frank remarked, as we stood anxiously, poles in hand, watching the green banks hurry by us.

"It ought to," was my answer. "It's at least thirty yards wider at the ford; and I doubt if it's quite as swift. And now that we've started, we might as well run down to the road. It won't take more than a jiffy to get there, if we don't hit a snag or something."

"That's right. We're whooping things up. Nothing slow about this old creek. So we'll wait for the ford. Have to, whether we want to or not. But what if the water's too deep for our poles down there?"

"We'll have to risk that."

"Yes, no help for it now. We can't do anything worse than drift on into the Brazos, or into the Gulf of Mexico." He laughed, rather nervously.

Every now and then, as the torrent hurried us along, we passed a place where the current, bobbing up and down, rocked the raft as it had been a bundle of sticks. Our horses, standing with outspread feet, and trembling, snorted loudly, and Vic set up an excited barking. Once or twice the raft swung around with us.

Soon we had navigated a mile of the stream on our clumsy craft; and rounding a bend, we saw the roof of Anderson's house overtopping another bend, and presently we could see where the road came down. And I noticed that the old traveler and his wife were standing at the water's edge, observing us.

Now the river was beginning to widen, and we made ready to try our poles again. The raft was rushing down the stream at a gallop, so to speak; and when I rashly thrust my pole into the water in front of it, the pole struck a rocky bottom and was jerked out of my hands so violently that I came within an inch of diving head first into the river after it. The raft swept over the pole, but I ran round the horses to the upper end and caught it as it bobbed up.

"Come over to this side!" Frank called to me.

Hastily I complied. Thrusting our poles down at the north edge we pushed the raft toward the south bank, and kept pushing it further and further and further, till it was out of the swiftest current. After that we had no serious difficulty in getting it to land, at the point where the road led out.

We had fastened a rope to one log; and while Frank leaped ashore and held the raft against the sloping bank, I led the horses off. They went with a jump, well pleased to find themselves on firm land again.

"What shall we do with this old concern, Travis? Let it float away?"

"No. Let's find a grape-vine and tie it to a tree. Somebody else may need it."

Leaving me to hold the raft, Frank struck off through the woods in search of a vine. While he was gone, I noticed the old man and his wife gazing toward the raft wistfully. Finally the man called out:

"What'll you take to ferry us across on that?"

"Too risky!" I shouted back. "We wouldn't dare try to bring a wagon and team over."

"The horses could swim."

I did not answer, and the man soon called again:

"I'll give you two dollars to raft my wagon across."

"Don't think we'd better try it."

The couple talked together, and then the man shouted:

"Don't know but what I might make it three."

I shook my head. "Rather not undertake it," I shouted back. I had eight round dollars in my pocket just now, and was more than anxious to get started on the trail of those cattle.

There was another consultation between the couple on the north bank, and the outcome of it was another offer:

"What do you say to four dollars?"

Again I shook my head, a little less decidedly this time. Finally the man asked:

"Would you do it for five?"

In my eyes this was a considerable sum, and I was very loath to reject it. "Wait till my partner comes back," I shouted, "and I'll see what he says."

"What's that you'll see about?" Frank called out just then, as he came hurrying through the woods, trailing a long vine.

"The folks camped over yonder are very anxious to cross," I explained. "The man says he'll give us five dollars to come over and get his wagon. Says his horses can swim. What do you think?"

"Five dollars! That's big money for a job like that. They must be hard up to cross. A whole lot easier than grubbing up live-oaks. Why not rake it in?"

"Would the raft float a wagon?"

"If the wagon's not too heavy." Then lifting his voice: "How much load do you carry?"

"No load to speak of. Just the empty wagon."

"I'm in for trying it," Frank now said. "Good big job to get this old concern over there and back—bigger than I thought at first; but we're the boys that can do it. We'll have to pull up stream about a quarter of a mile, or we can't land at the road yonder. If you want to try it hop aboard, and keep the raft away from the bank. I'll do the pulling."

After hitching our horses I jumped out upon the raft, followed by Vic. Frank seized the rope, threw it over his shoulder, and started up stream, along the edge of the bank. With my pole I kept the raft from rubbing the bank; and I also aided in pushing the raft along.

The current offered but little resistance close to land, but our awkward craft moved slowly, and we spent a full half hour toiling up to a point where it seemed safe to launch out. Then Frank threw the rope aboard, and scrambled down the bank after it, and we pushed off.

The stream was soon hurrying us toward the Gulf of Mexico, but we plied our poles vigorously, pushing the raft across, and doing what we could to retard its downward progress. And we landed at the right place.

"The reason we're so anxious to cross," the traveler told us, "is that the river's crawlin' up. It ain't climbin' so very fast, but it's purty tryin' to wait for a stream to run down that's on the rise. And we're powerful anxious to get on our way."

Now we secured the raft to bushes, against the end of the broken road. Then the three of us went up and brought the wagon down the steep bank by hand, its hind wheels locked fast. It was rolled to the center of the raft, leaving passage-room all around it where we could use our poles.

The old man remained on the raft, to keep it clear, while Frank and I went up, and walking along the edge of the high bank, dragged the raft up stream. The woman followed us, leading their two horses.

Believing that the raft would be harder to manage when loaded than it had been when light we towed it nearly up to Anderson's house. Anderson had gone to town, but his wife and children came out to watch us. At a place where a steep hog-path climbed the bank, we brought the horses down. Mrs. Anderson came to the water's edge with the traveler's wife. The latter was evidently very nervous.

"I feel mighty juberous about settin' foot on that thing," she said, tremulously. "If we wasn't so powerful anxious to get along, I wouldn't think of reskin' it. We've been visitin' our married son, up on the Leon river. And while we was there we got word that our daughter back at home had been took bad sick. If it wasn't for that, I wouldn't trust myself on this thing—not for love or money I wouldn't! I hope we'll come out all right, but I don't know—I don't know."

She spoke in a strained, high-pitched voice, which expressed her agitation even better than her words. Mrs. Anderson tried to reassure her, and so did Frank.

"We made one voyage of a mile and a half on this raft," he said, "and we landed all right side up. Nothing much to be afraid of, I guess."

Now we got ready to push off. The woman was by the wagon, and her husband near the raft's edge, holding the ropes that were

on his horses' necks. Frank and I, armed with our poles, stood at the corners. As the raft moved slowly out, the horses seemed very reluctant to follow it. And not till Anderson's little boy had pelted them with gravel did they enter the water. But once in they swam easily enough.

By the time we had reached mid-river, where the current ran like a mill-race, both the man and his wife were plainly very much frightened. But neither of them uttered a word; and Frank and I were too busy with our poles to give them more than an occasional glance. In one place the bobbing current rocked the raft threateningly.

Having a half-mile to do our work in, we found no great trouble in effecting a landing at the road. As the raft touched solid ground, I heard the woman behind me breathe a sigh of relief.

The horses were now led, steaming, out of the river. After being harnessed they were put to the wagon, and the wagon was pulled up the bank. While I held the raft, Frank followed the wagon up to level ground to get his grape-vine. He soon returned, with the vine in one hand and a five-dollar bill in the other.

"Here, Travis, take this and give me two and a half in change."

"What do you want with change?"

"Why, I thought I'd hand my half back. You heard what the woman said about their sick daughter at home. And they seem to be rather poor, too. Of course we're entitled to the five dollars if we want it. We've earned it fairly, according to agreement. But somehow I don't want my share."

"Then never mind about the change. Just hand it all back, and call the matter square."

Both the man and his wife declared they could not accept the money; but Frank tossed it, laughingly, into the woman's lap as she sat in the wagon, and then he hurried away.

"We're a thousand times obliged to you, both of you," the man leaned out to say.

Just as he was driving off, another wagon appeared on the north bank. This one was also covered, or partly covered; and two men sat on the spring-seat in front, but out from under the canvas.

After coming down to the water's edge to look at the river, one of them shouted across:

"What's that you've got there?" And on being informed he added: "Can you ferry us across on it?"

"We don't care to try," I called back.

"How did that other wagon get over?"

"We rafted it over."

"Then why can't you come over again for us?"

"We're not running a ferry. And we've lost more time now than we can afford to lose."

The man offered us a dollar to come and get them, and kept increasing it till the bid reached twenty dollars. And if we had held off long enough he might have offered us a hundred.

Frank had been willing to accept a much smaller sum, but I was obstinate. It was now well on in the day, and I felt very impatient to get started after our cattle. Though eager enough to earn money, I reflected that if I lost an ox worth thirty or forty dollars, I should be greatly the loser in the end.

But when the offer was increased to twenty dollars—ten apiece—it proved too tempting, and I could hold out no longer.

Again we dragged our cumbersome craft far up stream; and again we launched out into the turbid torrent, upon the most exciting river-voyage I have ever made.

CHAPTER XI.

THAT MYSTERIOUS WAGON.

BY the time we had effected a landing on the north bank the two men with the wagon were boiling over with impatience. One of them was pacing up and down like a chained bear. Scarcely had our raft butted the shore when he began to hurry us. He was a fellow of rather striking appearance, with a heavy black mustache, which drooped over the corners of his mouth.

"What are you in such a fidge about?" demanded Frank, half resentfully, after being several times urged to make haste.

"Why, we've got a mighty sick man in the wagon up there, and we want to rush 'im to a doctor just as quick as we can."

"Oh, a sick man, eh? That's a different thing. Why didn't you say so at first? Of course we'll hurry," answered Frank, all his resentment gone instantly.

"How can we get our wagon onto your old log-pile?" asked the man with the black mustache.

"You'd better take your horses loose, and we'll run the wagon down by hand," I spoke up. "That's the way we did the other wagon."

"And then we'll put the team on, eh?"

"Your horses will have to swim," Frank informed him.

"They're mighty hot to be put into the water. We've been travelin' like a prairie fire for the last hour or two. Won't this old contraption float our whole outfit? It's big enough."

"We could make a second trip for the horses; or raft them over first and then come back for the wagon," I suggested.

"No, that won't do—won't do at all. Take too long," the man declared, irritably.

"We might roll the wagon on," said Frank, and then try leading the horses on, one at a time. If the raft will float them, all right. But if it won't float, they'll either have to swim or we shall have to make a second trip."

The traveler agreed to this; and we all went up and brought the wagon down and rolled it out upon the raft. The sheet, I noticed, covered only the part of the wagon behind the spring-seat. But it was so closed at both ends that nowhere could we catch even a glimpse of the sick man. I wondered why it was necessary to seal him up so hermetically.

When the horses were brought on board their weight, added to the wagon weight and ours, settled the raft pretty deep in the water. Not so deep, though, but that we thought it safe to make the voyage over with the whole load.

The two men remained on the raft, one to hold the horses and one to use a pole. Frank and I walked along the edge of the cliff-like bank above, tugging at the rope. And a hard, hot pull we had of it. For the heavily loaded, deep-sunk raft fought mightily against the current. By the time we had toiled two hundred yards up stream, in the broiling sun, our faces were dripping. And when the man with the black mustache, still impatient, urged us to come aboard and push off, we gladly took advantage of the first sloping place to do so.

Frank and I were now using the poles, and the men were standing, one on either side of the wagon, and each holding a horse. Before we had moved far out into the river Frank, whose curiosity must have been aroused, inquired as he passed the black-mustached man:

"What ails your sick friend?"

"Oh, nothin' but smallpox, I guess."

I had happened to overhear both the question and the answer; and so startled was I that I dropped my pole, narrowly catching it again. Frank spun around as if he had been shot at, and I saw him turn pale.

As for myself, for a few moments I came dangerously near to plunging into the river and swimming for land. I had never been much closer than a hundred miles to smallpox. But to me the word was synonymous with a slow and awful death. I had heard of one case where all of a man's relatives had fled from him in terror, leaving him to die alone of the dread disease.

"Why didn't you tell us that sooner?" demanded Frank, in a voice husky with anger.

"Because you didn't ask me," was the innocent reply.

Frank came over to me. "What can we do?" he said, in low, agitated tones. We were both half frightened out of our senses; for neither of us had ever been vaccinated.

But I could think of nothing. Indeed, my vivid imagination was already conjuring up pictures of us two dying alone somewhere of the loathsome pestilence. And the horror of the fate awaiting us almost benumbed my brain. We had forgotten the raft and forgotten where we were, and stood facing each other, with our poles in our hands. One fact stared at us in all its ghastliness: we were face to face with Death, as we believed, and he had marked us for his own.

"What are you boys doin'? Where you lettin' us drift to? If you'll git us across right quick, ain't much danger of you ketchin' it."

"Yes, let's push across the first minute we can, Frank!" I exclaimed, arousing myself from my dazed condition. Like a drowning person, I had clutched at the straw of hope in the man's words. "And just look where we are!" I cried out.

While we had stood idle, the current had been industriously sweeping us down stream. Already we saw ourselves opposite the point where we should have touched land; and the raft was not yet half way across.

Both Frank and I took in all this at a glance. And both now fell to poling as hard as we could. The very thought of keeping company for any considerable time with that death-infected wagon was sufficient to fill us with terror. We worked frantically—so frantically that when I dropped my pole into a deep place in the river-bed, I narrowly saved myself from tumbling overboard.

Hard as we poled and pushed, we missed all the sloping bank below the road. Below this was an inlet forty or fifty yards wide, where backwater now reached out into the woods. And immediately below this inlet began a line of low cliffs on that side. The raft once opposite those cliffs, landing would be next thing to impossible till we drifted no telling how far; perhaps a mile or two.

With all our frantic haste we fought to reach the inlet. For a few minutes it seemed that we must be carried by it. But the outer current was weaker, and once in that we could hold the raft. We quickly decided to pole out into the inlet and seek for a landing-place at its far end.

Just as we were approaching the trees—those standing knee-deep

in the backwater—I heard the rapid beating of hoofs on the north bank, up at the road. Glancing in that direction, I saw three horsemen galloping down the river-bank. Another glance, a little later, showed them reining up opposite us, and drawing their guns. This, though a strange proceeding, scarcely attracted my attention at the time. I was too eager to land the raft and put distance between me and that wagon.

“Halt! Halt there!”

These words rang out in stentorian tones across the water. I glanced up, and so did Frank, but not for a moment did we pause in our work. To reach land was the only thing in the world just now.

“Halt there, I say!”

Presently a Winchester roared out. The report, tossed back by the hills, went echoing through the woods, ripping and roaring, and seeming to rend the very forest. And a bullet came singing over our heads—singing a tune of death. Other reports followed in quick succession, and other bullets ping-winged over us, clipping off leaves and twigs among tree-tops.

Ordinarily I should have been terrified at this strange proceeding; now I little more than noticed it. I wondered vaguely what it all meant, but neither Frank nor I stopped poling for a moment. There was something in that wagon more frightful to us than bullets.

Our two men were behind the wagon, and one of them called out:

“Push into the woods just as quick as you can, boys!”

The admonition was wholly unnecessary. Guiding the raft between trees, we soon had it deep in the flooded forest, and behind some land, where the horsemen were out of sight. Then, and not till then, did their bullets leave us in peace.

“Mighty close shave for us,” I overheard one of the men remark, in a relieved tone. And then he came round and explained:

“Just some fellers after us for bringin’ a smallpox patient through the country.”

“Pity they didn’t catch you,” I answered, wrathfully.

The water kept growing shallower, and within a few yards of dry land the raft ran fast aground.

“Come on, Travis!” cried Frank, as he threw down his pole, stepped off into the water, and made for land. I followed, and we had soon waded ashore, climbed a sloping bank, and started off through the woods toward our horses.

“Hold on there, boys! What are you in such a rush about? Can’t you give us a lift with the wagon?”

We dropped down from a run to a walk, but kept on.

“We’d better ride full-tilt for the nearest doctor,” Frank was saying, “and try to get vaccinated.

“But isn’t it too late now?”

“No. They claim it will do good, even after you’ve been exposed to smallpox. If you have the disease at all, it will prove very mild.”

“Then let’s start quick and ride hard. We shall never see our cattle again, I suppose.”

“Who cares for cattle?” exclaimed Frank. “I wouldn’t have the smallpox for all the cattle in Texas.”

“Hold up, boys!” the black-mustached man now called out. “Say, boys, I was just jokin’ about that. No smallpox here.”

At this we stopped suddenly, in amazement. “Queer kind of a joke,” growled Frank.

“You mustn’t be takin’ to your heels, boys. I didn’t intend to scare you to death. Our friend in the wagon has got somethin’ ailin’ of ’im, and we’re takin’ ’im to the doctor for it. But I doubt if it’s smallpox.”

"Smallpox!" exclaimed the other man, scornfully. "He ain't got no more smallpox than I have."

Ordinarily we should have been angry at the deception practiced upon us. But so wonderful was our relief at this latest development that we forgot everything else. Now, for me at least, the world seemed suddenly to turn right side up again.

"Why didn't you tell us that before?" demanded Frank. Then he added, in a lower tone, to me: "We were about to forget our money. Let's go back for it. How much shall we charge them?"

"When they first told us they had a sick man in the wagon, I felt that we ought to let them off with four or five dollars, or even less. But after that smart joke, I vote to charge them full price."

"So do I. They shall pay the last cent."

We went back, and wading into the water, aided in rolling the wagon off the raft out upon dry ground. Then we helped put the horses to it. The men were evidently in a great hurry to be gone; but so nervous were they both that in their frantic haste they seemed to get very little done. But now they leaped up into the spring-seat, ready to start.

"Our money, if you please," said Frank, a little gruffly perhaps.

"Your what!" exclaimed the man with the black mustache, in well feigned surprise.

"Our money," I said. "The twenty dollars you owe us for rafting you across the river."

"Oh, don't mention it, boys—don't mention it!" replied the man, with a wave of his hand, as if waving aside our thanks for some favor he had done us. And up the bank went the wagon, and away it trotted swiftly, through the woods toward the road.

For a full minute, as it seemed, we stood staring after it.

"Well, for downright, bare-faced, devilish rascality, that beats anything I ever ran up against!" exploded Frank, wrathfully, disgustedly.

I was still past speaking. "Come on!" I finally burst out. "Let's get to our horses and follow the scoundrels!"

Frank started with me, but stopped again, rather suddenly.

"It won't do any good, Travis. If they don't want to pay us, I don't know of any way to squeeze it out of them now. If we'd been wise, we'd have collected in advance. We'll know better the next time. They're not the right sort, those fellows. There's a big, black streak in them somewhere. Come to think of it, there's something suspicious about this whole business. If they didn't have smallpox in that wagon, what were those fellows shooting at them for?"

"The chances are they did have smallpox, after all, Frank. They lied to us one way or the other, and they're just as likely to have lied last as first. Let's go back. Maybe those fellows are still over there."

We hurried through the woods till we came to the river, at the place where we had left our horses. The three men had dismounted on the far bank, evidently at a loss for some means of getting across. Scarcely had we shown ourselves when one of them, a little man with a big voice—the same voice we had heard before—shouted to us:

"Is there any kind of a ferry on this river?"

"Who are you?" I shouted back.

"I'm the sheriff of Palo Pinto county."

"And what do you want?"

"We're after that wagon that just crossed."

"What for?"

"There's a notorious desperado in it. We've been on his trail for days."

"Has he got smallpox?"

"Got what?"

"Small—pox!" I yelled, spreading the syllables far apart for distinctness.

"No. But he'll get something worse if we capture him."

"Are you sure he hasn't got it?"

"Of course I am! The devil never catches smallpox."

I was wonderfully relieved. The fellows with the wagon invented the whole story.

"We can swim the river if we have to," the sheriff was saying. "But our horses are pretty hot and tired, and we'd rather not put them into the cold water if there's any way to ferry."

Frank and I consulted. "We brought those desperadoes across; now let's give the officers a lift," I proposed.

"That we will! Of course we will! And be glad of the chance to!" exclaimed my friend heartily.

Both of us were feeling pretty sore over that lost twenty dollars; and ten times sorer over the high-handed way we had been robbed of it, and over the horrible fright we had received.

"Yes, we can raft you across," I shouted. "It will take some time, though."

"All right! Be just as quick as you can, boys. Those scoundrels are gaining on us every minute."

CHAPTER XII.

THE MILL IN THE MOUNTAINS.

WE now ran for our raft and after poling it out of the back-water inlet we dragged and poled it up the south bank. But, prompted by the necessity for hurrying, we stopped considerably short of the point from which we had launched out on our previous voyages across the river.

This was a mistake, as we speedily learned. For scarcely had we got half-way across when it became plain to all of us that the raft must miss the intended landing place by at least a hundred yards. And below the road there was nothing but upright bank.

In this emergency the sheriff, hastily knotting two of their lariats together, coiled them and hurled the end at us. Frank caught it dexterously and then both of us, throwing down our poles, grasped the rope and braced our feet. Now the three men on the bank pulled us to land, in defiance of the current.

The sheriff's name, we were informed, was McCracken, and the two men with him were his deputies. They were armed to the teeth, every one. Though small of stature Sheriff McCracken was big in courage as well as in voice. And we afterwards learned that he had some reputation as a catcher of outlaws. Indeed, his name was a terror to evil-doers. With the tenacity of a blood-hound he had been known to trail a criminal from one end of the wide state to the other.

For a few days the three men had been hot on the trail of a notorious desperado, Bill Edsell by name. Both Frank and I had heard and read much of this fellow. He was guilty of many crimes. More than one officer of the law had gone down before him; and there was a price on his head, to be paid for capturing him dead or alive.

When hard pressed by his pursuers the desperado had suddenly disappeared as if the earth had opened and swallowed him up. But just as they were about to abandon the chase as hopeless the officers had learned, by the merest chance, that some of Edsell's friends had concealed him in a covered wagon and were trying to get out of the country with him.

McCracken's party informed us that all the shots had been fired over our heads. But the sheriff declared that if Frank and I had not been on the raft, and in the most exposed condition, he would have stopped the raft or riddled that wagon with bullets.

"I wonder what made those fellows lie to us about smallpox," said Frank.

"They may have done it to hurry you," McCracken answered. "But I rather guess they wanted to make sure you didn't get curious and go to nosing around their wagon."

"Well, they succeeded beautifully," I spoke up. "The wagon looked a little mysterious, and I might have been tempted to take a peep under the cover. But after smallpox was mentioned I wouldn't have lifted that canvas for a gold mine."

When we had explained that it would again be necessary to tow the raft a few hundred yards up stream, the sheriff said:

"We haven't got a minute to spare. You boys stay on there, and we'll do the pulling."

After fastening their lariats to the raft, they led their horses up the hill, then sprang into their saddle. Immediately Frank and I had all we could do with our poles, and the raft was plowing the water up stream with the speed of a steamboat.

"This will be far enough," Frank soon called out.

The men now dismounted; and after we had loosed and they had coiled their lariats they led their horses down a steep path and out upon the raft. Promptly we pushed off, and a few minutes later the raft butted its head against the south bank at the road. The officers at once led their horses ashore and mounted.

"Well, boys," said the sheriff, "you've rafted us across nicely, and we're many times obliged to you for it. There's a reward out for that desperado, and if we capture him there'll be at least ten dollars apiece coming to you for the information and help you've given us. And you shall have it as we pass back. But here's something for your trouble till then." He tossed us a five-dollar bill.

"We don't charge—" Frank began.

But the three were already galloping away, their spurs jangling, their holstered Winchesters hammering their saddles, and their holstered six-shooters flopping against their sides.

"Well, our hard half-day's work panned out something, didn't it?" remarked Frank, as he stooped and picked up the money. "They wouldn't give us time to explain that we didn't charge them anything, nor that we don't live here. Hope we shall not be hanging around the Cowhouse when they come back by."

"That we won't! We've lost time enough already. Let's be moving."

We untied our rope, but left the raft moored to a tree with Frank's grape-vine. Some other traveler might have need of our makeshift ferry-boat.

It was now past dinner-time, but without stopping to eat we mounted our horses and started for the Edwards house, where we hoped to strike the trail of our cattle.

But before arriving there we met Edwards, coming on foot. He had been away from home, and had just returned. His wife had told him of the shots fired by McCracken's party and he was curious to find out what they meant. Of course we had to relate the whole story of our morning's experiences.

Afterwards he insisted upon taking us home with him for dinner. While eating we learned how our cattle had happened to escape.

One corner of the pasture reached down into the bottom-lands along the river, where the fence crossed a little branch, for water. After our cattle had been in the pasture a few days the river rose so high that the back-water, following up the branch, floated the rail-fence and let it tumble down. The water retreated during the night and before morning it was supposed Lep and his followers had passed out through the broken fence and gone.

Edwards had not missed them till the afternoon of the following day. Then he rode a good many miles hunting for them, in different directions, but failed to even hear of them.

"The minute they got out they probably struck a bee-line for southwest Texas," I informed him.

A short time later Frank and I were in pursuit. We took the road we believed Lep had followed and after riding several miles we succeeded in finding a settler who had seen the three animals pass. Encouraged by this news we pushed on faster.

The farther we advanced the more broken the country became. Few people lived here, and those were well hid in the deep, narrow valleys. When night overtook us there was no house at hand, and

we camped on the bank of a creek. By daylight next morning we were in the saddle again.

During this day we had no end of trouble following the trail. The roads were so rocky that we could rarely distinguish a hoof-print. And the houses along the road were so few and far between that we seldom had an opportunity to make inquiries. More than once we strayed off on a false scent and had to retrace our steps.

Rougher and rougher grew the country as we advanced till we found ourselves in cedar-brakes. Now there was little or nothing but mountains. Settlers were few, and roads even fewer; and there was not much danger of our going astray.

Not long before night, while following our dim road as it wound through the odorous cedars and the foot of a mountain, we came upon a small boy. He was sitting flat in the road, picking up some spilt corn grain by grain, chicken-like. His horse was browsing near by. The boy was on his way to mill, he told us. His sack had come untied, allowing half of his corn to spill and the other half to drop to the ground.

The accident had happened not long after noon and the patient little mountaineer had been picking up his scattered corn ever since. There were but a few grains left now, and I dismounted, tied the sack, and lifted it upon the horse for him.

"That's what's been worryin' me 'most to death," he said.

"What's that?" asked Frank, as I picked up the freckle-faced, hardy-looking little knot of humanity and set him on top of his grist. "Why, how to git this here sack up ag'in. Ain't many folks comes along here."

The boy rode with us. At length we came to a not very large but very clear mountain-stream. A hundred yards above the road, at a natural fall in the creek, stood a little water-mill. The mill-house, which was of cedar logs, was small; and the wheel was now in motion, the water pouring over it noisily.

The boy turned up toward the mill, and Frank and I went also. The miller, gray with the evidences of his calling, sat outside by the door, in the shade of the house, his chair tilted back against the rough wall. As we approached, he came out to carry in the boy's grist.

"Get down! Get down and come in!" he invited. And then he said to the boy: "Want it ground or swapped, Jimmy?"

"I did want it ground, but it's so late now—" He glanced toward the sun, which was almost touching the mountain-tops.

"Better swap it then," said the miller. "Just as good anyhow."

He disappeared inside, but soon came out again, bringing the sack, well filled with meal now instead of corn. He put it upon the horse, behind its owner, and the boy rode back the way he had come.

Thinking that this man might have been watching the road, we explained what we were looking for.

"Yes, boys, I saw the very three animals you describe go by down there—let's see now, when was it? Oh yes, about the middle of yesterday evenin'. I was settin' here by the door. The big, spotted fellow was in the lead, but the others kept right close behind him. The young cattle stopped every now and then to nibble a bite of grass, but the old one just kept joggin' along steady-like. I couldn't help noticin' 'em."

"Well, we're glad to hear of the sly rascals once more," Frank assured him.

"How fur have you come lookin' for 'em?" the miller inquired, with a glance at Frank's saddle-bags.

"I'm nearly two weeks from home. Can't say just how many miles I have traveled," was my answer.

"I've been on the road about ten days," said Frank. "But we were water-bound a good share of that time."

"You don't say so!" exclaimed the miller, dusting his clothes vigorously. "Well, you're nosin' the scent like old trailers. But get down—get down and stay all night with me. I'm here by myself, and I'll be the gladdest kind to have you."

We declined, telling him we would buy a few feeds of corn for our horses, if he had any to sell, and then go down the creek several hundred yards and camp. The grazing was rather too scanty here to depend on. But the miller insisted so earnestly that we finally consented to spend the night with him.

He furnished us shelled corn for our horses, and when we tried to pay him he refused to accept a cent. During the conversation which followed he made use of a favorite saying of his, which was a key to the man's character:

"Fellow that won't get down off his horse and pour out his corn, to lend his neighbor his sack to go to mill with, ain't no neighbor at all."

The miller cooked and slept in two small rooms adjoining the mill-room; and in one of these we ate our supper, the mill grinding steadily all the while.

After we three had washed the dishes the miller lighted a smoky lamp in the mill-room, and refilled the hopper. Then we all went out, taking our chairs, and sat in front of the door. The water had a musical sound as it poured down, broken by the steplike turning of the big wheel, and by the soft, gentle grinding, inside, of the little mill, not much larger and scarcely as noisy as a big coffee-mill.

"Powerful sight of company, that water is, after you once get used to it," the miller assured us. "When I first put up this mill here, nearly fifteen years ago now, the noise bothered us a little, me and my wife. But after we'd been livin' by it awhile we just naturally come to like it. My wife used to say that when she got out of hearin' of this water-fall she always felt kind of lost and lonesome-like. And when she died, three years ago last June, though she'd never said a word about it, I kind of thought she'd like it better and so we dug her grave right out there at the foot of the mountain, in plain hearin' of the water. And I've let all my neighbors understand that when my time comes to go I want to be laid out there, too."

After telling us this the man remained silent for a minute or so, and we respected his silence.

But he was far from being a morbid or gloomy man, this mountaineer miller, living alone though he was. Indeed, we found him very cheerful. And he had become something of a philosopher in his way. He had settled here with the very first settlers. And not long afterwards he had started his water-mill. He told us many interesting experiences of those early days, some strange, some exciting, and most of them laughable. For he had a way of picking out cheerful things to talk about.

When bedtime came the miller showed us our bed, in the room adjoining the mill-room.

"You two sleep there," he said.

"But where are you to sleep?" I wanted to know.

"Oh, I do most of my sleepin' in a chair these nights. You see I'm behind with my grindin' just now, and have to run day and night to ketch up. My mill's little and grinds mighty slow. But I don't keep awake all night long—not me. I just fill the hopper chuck full of corn, then set down in my chair and tilt back against the

wall and go to sleep. The mill makes a different noise when it runs empty, and that always wakes me. Then up I bounce and fill the hopper with corn ag'in. That way I get a lot of grindin' done at night, and don't lose much sleep either."

To shut out some of the noise the miller closed the door between our room and the mill-room. But the sound of the little mill, chewing away steadily on its dry supper, came through the planks. And the music of the splashing water and revolving water-wheel filled all the air. Instead of keeping me awake, as I had half expected, these sounds quickly lulled me to sleep.

Voices in the mill-room awoke me. The miller's was among them, but there were two others, both louder and harsher than the miller's quiet tones. I had not heard the men enter, but they had evidently just come, for one of them was explaining:

"I'm a sheriff, and this is one of my deputies. We've been trailing some cattle-thieves, and just at dusk tonight we ran onto the rascals. For a little while, you'd better believe, we had it hot and heavy. They all got away—I don't know how much damage we did them. But they left my friend here with a bullet in his leg to remember them by. We saw your light, and thought we'd stop in and try to dress the wound."

The voice of this speaker was strange, but the voice that answered was one I had certainly heard somewhere before, though I could not recall where.

"Thing got to hurtin' me so bad I couldn't hardly ride," the wounded man was complaining. "Like stickin' a knife clean through me every time the horse moved."

While I was wondering whose the familiar voice could be, the men in the other room were examining the wound, as I could make out from their conversation. Presently the miller said:

"Wait a minute, till I fetch a pan and some water and my bottle of turpentine. Best thing in the world to put on a wound, turpentine is."

He came through the partition-door, leaving it partly open, and passed on into the kitchen.

From my position in bed I could now look into the mill-room, and could plainly see the two visitors. The one who had announced himself a sheriff was standing. He was an utter stranger to me. The other man was sitting in a chair, with one leg mostly bare, save for the dried blood crusted on it. At the sight of his face I gave a start; for I recognized him instantly, especially by the black mustache drooping over the corners of his mouth. He was the principal man in charge of the wagon we had rafted across the Cowhouse—the wagon with the desperado concealed in it.

"But who is the other man?" I questioned myself. And the answer that flashed into my mind was: "That must be the fellow that was in the wagon; that must be Bill Edsell himself." And I lay there staring at him.

Presently the miller passed back into the mill-room, shutting the partition-door after him, and shutting the two men out of my sight. Instantly I sat up in bed.

"So that's the way the wind blows, is it?" I said to myself. "You fellows are at your lying tricks again. Instead of being officers you're outlaws. And instead of getting that wound from catt'e-thieves, you got it from some sheriff. Yes, that's it; you've met Sheriff McCracken."

CHAPTER XIII.

FOUND AND LOST AGAIN.

NOW I turned to arouse my bed-fellow, but found him already wide awake. He had only just awakened, however, and had not caught sight of the visitors in the mill-room. But he, too, had half recognized the wounded man's voice; and he was not greatly surprised when I informed him who the man was, and who I suspected his companion to be.

After listening a few minutes to the conversation in the other room, Frank slipped out of bed and stole to the door, where he peeped through a crevice. When he had come back and lain down, he whispered:

"Yes, that's our tricky fellow. I know his mark and brand. And the fellow with him must be bad Bill. Pretty impudent in them, trying to pass themselves on our friend for officers."

"Don't see that we can do anything. We couldn't arrest them, of course. It would take half a dozen men to do that, armed and desperate and on their guard as these fellows are."

"Well, it's a pity to let the rascals get away when they're wanted so badly. But it can't be helped, I suppose."

After the injured man had had his wound washed and bandaged, the other visitor inquired of the miller if he could furnish them something to eat. The miller offered to prepare them a warm supper if they cared to wait; but they had not time for that, they told him, and he went to the kitchen and brought in something already cooked. He also gave them corn to feed their horses. Not long afterwards they mounted and rode on.

Even before the hoof-beats of their horses had died away down the rocky road Frank and I were up, informing the miller that he had entertained angels unawares—angels of darkness.

Our good friend could scarcely restrain his astonishment on learning how the wounded man must have received that bullet, and that one of the pair was probably the notorious, much-feared Bill Edsell.

"Well, they ought to be arrested, of course," the miller finally said. "And they will be sooner or later, I've no doubt—or killed. But, desperado or what not, when a man comes to me bleedin' and hungry, and asks me to bandage his wounds and give 'im a bite to eat, it's not in the heart of a mountaineer to say no."

We both endorsed this sentiment; and we certainly liked the miller all the better for uttering it.

A few hours still remained till daylight, and Frank and I went back to bed and to sleep. We had breakfast early next morning, and during the meal we discussed our visitors of the night before.

After reflection, the miller was disposed to doubt whether the man who had represented himself as a sheriff was really Edsell. One of McCracken's party had started to describe the desperado to us, but had stopped on learning that we had caught not so much as a glimpse of the fellow in the wagon. Our surmise on the unknown man's identity was based solely on the fact that he was in company with the man who had been with Edsell. But the desperado had numerous

friends, and, for reasons of prudence would not be likely to stay with any one of them very long.

"He's been through this country once or twice, Edsell has," the miller told us. "That is, once or twice that we know of, and no tellin' how many times that most of us don't know of. I never set eyes on 'im myself, to recognize 'im, but I've talked with people that have; and while I don't recollect just what they said about 'im, I got the idy that he was a different lookin' fellow from the man that was here last night. Of course I may be mistaken as to that, though."

"Come to think of it now, that man didn't look as much like a villain to me as the man he was with did—the wounded man," I remarked.

"That's just what I kept saying to myself all the time I was peeping through that crack at them," spoke up Frank.

"Well, the worst men don't always look the worst," observed the miller. "I've seen some mighty fierce-lookin' chaps that was just naturally scared at their own shadders. And I've knowed some quiet, harmless-lookin' fellows that would fight the very Old Scratch himself if they once got started. I've not much doubt, though, that that fellow was a criminal. Birds of a feather flock together, and if he was all right he wouldn't be keepin' company with the friend of outlaws. But there's a good many hard characters hid away in these mountains, I guess, and he might have been any one of 'em."

The miller now told us something of Edsell that we had never heard before. Though a villain from head to heels, and richly deserving a rope, the desperado was a man of good education. Indeed it was even reported that he was a graduate of some well-known Eastern or Southern college or university. That, however, was doubtless a surmise; for nobody really knew anything about his past—where he came from or anything else.

Both Frank and I were astonished at this news. Our acquaintance was mostly among people of little learning; and we had naturally supposed that educated persons, knowing better than others what is right, would be sure to do what is right. That may be true in the main, but there are numerous exceptions. As the miller expressed it:

"It takes somethin' besides book-learnin' to keep a man straight when he once makes up his mind to go crooked."

Immediately after breakfast we saddled our horses, and after vainly trying to induce the miller to accept something for our night's entertainment we mounted and set out on our day's travel. The miller walked down to the road with us; and having wished us early success in our cattle-hunt he urged us to stop and spend another night with him on our way back.

All day long we rode, keeping up our search through the mountainous country. It was much like the proverbial hunt for a needle in a haystack. The roads were dim and rough, and most of them ended utterly at some cabin, of cedar logs, hid away in some deep little cove. Half a dozen of these blind roads were followed out, and much of our time was spent in retracing our way.

About the middle of the afternoon we happened upon a settler who told us that our three cattle had stopped in front of his cabin the day before, and had licked a while at some stones on which he salted his stock. They were then traveling a little east of south, instead of southwest. Like ourselves, Lep was evidently confused by the mountain roads, which seldom led in the direction he wanted to go. He knew his course, doubtless, but dared not cut across the mountains. And it was fortunate for us that he dared not.

Night overtook us in a wild gorge, between cedar-covered heights. And there in a little green, grassy spot we camped. Vic treed a squirrel in a young cedar. Frank shook it out for her, and we had it, broiled, for supper. Cedar branches broken off and spread under our blankets made us a fairly comfortable but very rank-smelling bed. Daylight found us on the road again.

By noon we had left the cedar-brakes behind. The country we now found ourselves in was still somewhat broken, but more people lived here, and the roads were better and more traveled.

Twice today we got word of our cattle. They were now heading toward the southwest again. But early in the afternoon we lost the trail—lost it as utterly as if the three horned brutes had grown wings and flown away.

House after house we inquired at, but Lep and his followers had not been seen. On we hurried, till six or eight houses had been passed. Then, knowing that something must be wrong, we took the back track.

"I don't understand it," grumbled Frank. "This road leads in the very direction they've been traveling all the time since they got out of the mountains. They must have turned aside to graze, and strayed off into the brush."

That was my opinion, too. So, riding back the way we had come, we hunted out the country on both sides of the road till we arrived at a well-traveled cross-road, leading northwest and southeast.

"Do you think they could have followed either end of this?" asked Frank as we reined up at the point of intersection.

"I don't see why they should. But they've certainly branched off somewhere, and we can only find out by trying."

And try we did. First we followed the cross-road a mile or two to the northwest, inquiring at every house, till we had convinced ourselves that Lep's party had not traveled that way. Then we came back to the crossing and started off in the opposite direction—toward the southeast.

At the first place where we inquired they assured us that no such animals as ours had passed; and at the second and third places we received similar replies. All spoke of a drove of cattle, driven by some cattle-buyers, that had marched along here the day before, moving toward the southeast. This was no news to us. The trail of the drove was very plain.

But at the fourth house, where we halted just at dusk, a different answer awaited us.

"I didn't see any three cattle go by by themselves," the farmer made reply. "But in that herd that passed along here yesterday I noticed a good-sized spotted steer that answers the description of yours."

"That must have been some other spotted steer," I spoke up. "What would the buyers be doing with our cattle among theirs?"

"Well, some of these cattle-buyers ain't any too partic'lar about what they pick up. They'd just as lieve hook onto a few strays as not. If the owner happens along and claims 'em, of course they turn 'em over to 'im. But if nobody comes they keep the cattle, and then they're just so much ahead. That outfit stopped here, and wanted to buy some young steers from me, but we split on prices. They're just makin' a big cattle-buyin' circuit, they told me. They expect to swing round a circle, and then drive back to their ranch, somers away out west, in Tom Green county I think they said."

"What did that spotted steer look like?" questioned Frank.

"Well, first and fo'most, and what caught my eye quickest, was his outlandish horns. Don't know when I've seen longer, if I ever

did. He wore a big bell, too, and was branded on the left hip. I didn't make out the brand, but part of it was raised, I noticed."

A raised brand is one where the branding-iron has burnt too deep, and the hide puffs up above the surrounding hair, hard as horn.

"And his neck showed signs of the yoke," the farmer added.

Frank and I exchanged glances. "That's Lep all over," he remarked.

"Yes, that's either Lep or his twin brother," replied I. "And if he's with that drove, that will explain why our trail dropped out so suddenly. They must have met the drove at the cross-roads and got taken in. We'd better follow on and find out for sure."

"That's right; we'll follow on and find out," Frank agreed.

We proposed to ride on a few miles farther, but the farmer insisted that we spend the night with him, and we did.

The rising sun saw us on the road again. The drove's trail was very distinct, and we lost no time in making inquiries. Occasionally when we met somebody or passed people by the roadside, we asked how far ahead the cattle were. The drove was marching slowly, and by noon we were only a few miles behind.

We rode as fast as we dared, without tiring out our horses. Well on in the afternoon, coming to the top of a hill, we looked down into a valley and discovered the strung-out cattle, tramping steadily along the road.

"There's Lep! Don't you see him?" I cried, pointing to an animal whose spotted back and great horns made him conspicuous among many others. "And don't you hear his bell? I'd recognize that bell any time, anywhere."

"Well, if that isn't cool rascality for you!" said Frank. "One would suppose that every hoof in that drove belonged to those fellows. I can recognize one of mine from here, and I've no doubt—yes, there's the other one—the steer. They're all there all right."

"We've found them at last," I said, exultantly, more elated over this fact than shocked or disappointed because we had found somebody driving them off.

The drove numbered a hundred and fifty head, if not more. There were four drivers in charge of the cattle, and a canvas-topped wagon rattled along in the wake of the drove.

We rode on at our accustomed gait, and soon passed the wagon and came up with the cattle. One driver kept in the rear, mostly, and him we engaged in conversation. If at all suspicious of us, he concealed the fact. After we had talked with him a few minutes, Frank remarked, carelessly:

"You've got three cattle in that drove that don't belong there."

The man stiffened frigidly in the saddle and uttered a fierce oath.

"What three do you mean? P'int 'em out!" he roared.

Promptly I pointed to Lep. "That big, spotted fellow, with the bell on, belongs to me," I informed him.

"That spotted steer! Why, I've owned that brute ever since he was a suckin' calf, and his mammy before 'im. I'd just like to see the chap that can drive off old Spot without walkin' over my dead body!"

Both Frank and I were much taken aback. It had never occurred to us that the fellows would dare refuse to surrender our cattle.

"If you've owned him as long as you claim to, what's his brand?" I demanded, angrily.

"I'm not crammin' my skull with brands and sech like."

"Then which side is he branded on?" I demanded again. The ox was some distance ahead, and the brand could not be seen.

"On the outside!" the driver fairly shouted. And both he and the

other drivers, who had dropped back near him, guffawed loudly at this joke.

"That's exactly what I thought you knew about it," I answered, contemptuously. "The fact is, you never set eyes on that ox till yesterday, and you know it as well as I do."

"Nor on that red two-year-old heifer over there close to him; nor on that brown yearling steer right over yonder," put in Frank, pointing. "They're our cattle, all three, and we've come for them."

"I raised all three of them brutes from calves," the fellow blustered. "And no livin' man can tech a hair of 'em without wadin' knee-deep through our blood! Ain't that so, boys?"

"Bet your life it is!" shouted one of the drivers. And the others uttered similar expressions, all thickly punctuated with oaths.

"We're not blood-waders," Frank answered. "But we know what belongs to us, and we're going to have what's ours. Those three cattle are our property."

"And we're going to take them, one way or another!" I burst out, hotly. I was boiling over with wrath at their rascally, lying impudence.

The driver laughed insolently. "If you want 'em, just sail in and cabbage on 'em," he invited.

"That spotted steer is mine, and I'll take him wherever I find him!" I declared. "Come on, Frank, let's cut our cattle out!"

We both urged our horses toward the drove. But before we had advanced a dozen yards, the driver's sharp voice called out:

"I'd hold up there a minute if I's you!"

I was angry enough to ignore him, but something sinister in the tones caused me to look back—into the muzzles of four cocked six-shooters!

We both reined up suddenly. We were angry, but not reckless. And there's no denying that four pistols aimed straight at one's head, with four reckless dare-devils behind them, have a wonderfully chilling effect even on the hottest temper. And mine was so hot just now that it almost sizzled and sputtered, like a red iron dropped into a snow-drift.

Frank and I exchanged looks. "They've got the drop on us," he remarked, quietly.

There was nothing else to do, and we stood still where we were and let the cattle-thieves ride on. When thirty or forty yards away, one of them—one who had spoken before—turned in his saddle and called out:

"Let me give you two boys a little free advice. Turn round in the road and ride home, as straight as you can and as fast as you can. And don't stop to gabble with anybody on the way. If you do, you may be overhauled, and then your friends will grieve themselves to death waiting for you."

We sat in our saddles, staring at the fellow. His looks and tones were far more threatening than his words; but it was the man himself that caught our attention, rather than his threats. He had been some distance ahead at first, and we had failed to notice him. But now we recognized him instantly.

He was the man who had stopped at the mill in the mountains, with his wounded companion that night—the man who had represented himself as a sheriff, and whom we had at first suspected of being the desperado, Bill Edsell.

For some reason both Frank and I preferred to face the fellows till the last of them was beyond shooting distance. Then with one accord, and without a word, we turned and started slowly back the road.

"The impudent scoundrel!" Frank presently burst out, irritated by those last threats. "Wouldn't I like to see him jerked up to a limb?"

Though we little suspected it now the day was soon to come when, far out in the wilds, we should see that very thing. And justice to both of us requires me to state here that, so far from taking part in it or exulting over it, we did whatever we could to prevent it. It is one thing to wish something in hot blood, and another and very different thing to stand by deliberately and see the wish come to pass.

Bitter disappointment sank into our very souls as we reflected on this failure of ours to regain possession of our cattle; and that, too after we had trailed them so long and so far. And the last driver's implied threats, that we might be pursued and shot if we dared to inform on the thieves, only added insult to injury. We were not seriously worried by the threats, however.

After riding several hundred yards, I turned in my saddle and gazed toward the cattle. I could still make out Lep's spotted back and white horns among the horned throng, and the sight fired my blood.

"Wish I had a Winchester!" I burst out, in hot, helpless rage. "I'd like to drive a few bullets at those scoundrels!"

"That wouldn't do. They're too many for us," replied Frank. "Our wisest way is to set the sheriff on the robbers. That'll hit them harder than anything we can do to them ourselves. The penitentiary is gaping for every one of them."

"And I hope to see every scoundrel of them on the road there," answered I. "They'll shed some of their insolence, I rather guess, when they're togged out in striped duds."

We followed back the road to the first house, and there halted to make inquiries. After learning what county we were in, and the road to the county-seat, we set off rapidly to find the sheriff.

CHAPTER XIV.

OUTWITTED BY THE CATTLE THIEVES.

WE had started from near the county-line and the county-seat was twelve miles away. Night came down upon us before we had covered half the distance. Now we stopped at a farm-house, and obtained some corn and oats for our horses and some supper for ourselves. After resting an hour or so we saddled up again and rode on.

It must have been between nine and ten o'clock when we entered the square of the unlighted little town. First we made our way to the sheriff's office, in the court-house, and pounded a while on a locked, unresponsive door. Then we started out in quest of the sheriff's residence. It was on the outskirts of the town, we were told; but not till we had stopped at two or three wrong houses did we discover the right one.

The sheriff was in bed, and when we finally succeeded in drawing him out to the gate he came grumbling, evidently in a bad temper over his interrupted slumbers. He listened to our story in surly silence, broken only by an occasional gruff, ill-natured question.

"Well, come round to the office in the morning, and I'll go with you after the fellows," he finally told us.

"Why not make the ride tonight?" asked Frank. "It won't take half as long."

"No, I'm not going tonight," was the growling reply. "I've got something else to do besides gad about over the country in the dark."

"I thought sheriffs and doctors always went when they were needed, and not when it was convenient," I put in, as respectfully as I could. The mere suggestion of delay frightened me.

"Well, I won't stir a step till morning; so that's all there is to it," was the gruff reply.

Frank tried to argue the matter, but the longer the sheriff was talked to the grumpier he became. Soon he turned round and started back to the house.

"All right! We'll see you early tomorrow morning," I called after him. Then we rode away.

First we hunted up a livery stable and bought some feed for our horses. Carrying that, we rode out to a prairie which came close up to the town, and there we camped, under a big live-oak.

"All this slowness is enough to drive a fellow frantic," I grumbled to my friend. "No telling where that gang will be with our cattle by the time we get back over there tomorrow."

"That's right. Still, this is more convenient in some respects. Our horses are too tired for any more traveling just now. If there'd been another ride tonight we'd have had to put them in the livery stable and hire others. By morning, though, they'll be ready for the road again. Let's hope those fellows won't try to run away."

"Don't bank on that, Frank. They know we'll have the officers after them."

"They may believe they gave us such a scare that we'll never stop running till we get home."

"I'd like to think they're big enough gumps to believe that; but I'm afraid they're not."

We, as well as our horses, were very weary; and without doubt we should have slept soundly but for the hogs that swarmed around our camp all night long. A hundred times at least Vic chased them back from our immediate vicinity; and every time one of them felt her sharp teeth it squealed loud enough to frighten away sleep. Indeed, as I recall that night, it seems little more than a long nightmare of grunts and squeals.

"No more camps around town for me, if you please," growled Frank, next morning. "This beats a hog-ranch out of sight. These long-legged long-noses that forage a town over are always on the edge of starvation; and they're impudence itself."

In the dim dawn we ate a breakfast of cold scraps from Frank's saddle-bags; and by the time it was light we were mounted and riding round to the court-house, which stood in the center of the square and of the town. The sheriff's office was still locked fast, and we sought his residence again. To our disgust he and all his family were still abed and asleep.

We "rousted" him out. But at least two hours had dragged by before he had swallowed his last bite of breakfast. Frank and I waited and waited and waited, till we were well-nigh beside ourselves with impatience. And to try us still further, every time Dugan saw us—Dugan was the sheriff's name—he grumbled and growled at us because we had twice broken into his sleep.

At last, however, he was ready to do something, and we all marched over to the court-house. There the warrant for the cattle-thieves was made out. Then Dugan, after telling us to wait, announced that he was now going out for his horse and some deputies.

"We want a force strong enough to over-awe the thieves," he informed us, as he passed out at the door, leaving us alone in the office.

"The sleepy-headed old poke-easy! Will he never get a move on him?" said Frank, almost through his teeth.

"It's not in him to hurry," I answered. "He's first cousin to a snail."

"Yes, and full brother to a terrapin," declared my friend.

But at last, after our patience had been worn to frazzles the sheriff returned with three deputies. They were all mounted now, and all armed, with six-shooters and Winchester rifles. Frank and I sprang into our saddles, and away the six of us went. The sun had already traveled far on his day's journey. But, late or early, we two were delighted to see the road under us once more.

Instead of going to the place where we had left the cattle Dugan decided that we should cut across the country and intercept the thieves farther down the same road. Frank and I were willing enough; for we were afraid that the party might have traveled most of the night, and would be very hard to overhaul. However, there was also danger that they had changed their course; in which event we might be traveling away from them instead of toward them.

Even when under way we moved rather slowly; or at least it so seemed to my impatience. And it was high noon when we arrived at the road along which the thieves were supposed to be traveling. A glance showed us that a considerable drove of cattle had passed by here very recently, and we turned and rode after them. From a man in a wagon we learned that the drove was only a few miles ahead.

An hour or two later we rounded a bend in the road, and found ourselves close upon the cattle and their drivers. They were moving along at a very leisurely gait. Plainly not the slightest attempt had been made to run away.

There were but three drivers now, we noticed. The man whom we had once suspected of being Bill Edsell—and who, we had yet to

learn, was in reality that much-dreaded desperado—was no longer among them. But the other three we easily recognized as the fellows who had thrust their pistols into our faces the day before.

The six of us rode along quietly till we had almost passed the drivers. Then, of a sudden, Sheriff Dugan and his deputies wheeled, each with a cocked six-shooter, covered the three men, and ordered them to throw up their hands.

Somewhat to my surprise, the fellows who had been so bold and defiant the day before now submitted meekly, without offering to draw a weapon, or making even a show of resistance. Up went their six hands as one hand.

"What—what does this mean?" inquired their leader, mildly, with just indignation enough in his tones to make his words sound sincere. It was the same fellow who had blustered to us about wading through blood knee-deep.

"It means that I'm the sheriff of this county," answered that officer pompously, "and that I have a warrant for your arrest."

He drew the paper from his pocket and proceeded to read it. All the time both he and his deputies held their cocked six-shooters in the faces of their three prisoners. Frank and I sat quietly in our saddles, interested spectators of the striking scene.

"What are you arrestin' us fur? I don't quite understand," said the drover, still very mildly, after the reading had ended.

"Why, didn't you hear? For stealing cattle. Or at least for having stolen cattle in your possession and refusing to surrender them to the owners."

One of the deputies now rode up close to the prisoners and searched them, each in turn, but failed to find a single weapon. Dugan was surprised, and so were Frank and I. But we needn't have been. The prisoners, foreseeing the sheriff's visit, had doubtless left their six-shooters in their wagon.

"You can put down your hands now," Dugan told them. And he and his deputies put up their weapons.

"Sheriff," said the drover, "there's my cattle. Ain't a single cow-brute in that herd but what I've bought and paid hard cash fur. Most of 'em I've got bill of sales fur. If any of 'em's been stole, it wasn't me that stole 'em. Who is it accuses us of stealin' any of 'em?"

"These boys here." The sheriff made a motion toward Frank and me.

The drover looked at us mildly, and then at the officer.

"What animals in this outfit do they claim, sheriff?"

"Point 'em out, boys," said Dugan to us.

We turned toward the drove. The cattle had stopped, but most of them were scattering over some open land to graze. So excited had we been over the arrest that we had failed to notice the drove. Now we ran our eyes over them, hastily at first, then again, more carefully. Soon we looked at each other, blank consternation in our faces.

"Well, why don't you point 'em out, without waiting all day?" demanded the sheriff, irritably.

"They're not here. They've all been cut out," Frank replied.

Dugan uttered an angry exclamation. "Didn't you two make oath that these men had your cattle in their herd?" he demanded.

"Of course we did," answered Frank, with some spirit. "But we didn't make oath that they'd keep them there for all time. They've been cut out, I told you."

"We've been so eternally long getting here, they could have been cut out and run off a hundred times," growled I, bitterly disappointed and disgusted.

That was true enough. But there are many true things it were

wiser to leave unsaid. And certainly my remark, and probably Frank's also, belonged to that class. The sheriff had a peevish, spiteful temper, and our thrusts at his slowness irritated him and turned him hopelessly against us.

"Are these the same men that you claim to have seen driving off your cattle yesterday?" he demanded of us.

"They're three of them," I replied. "One that was here yesterday is not here now."

Then the sheriff turned to the drover. "Did these chaps"—he jerked his thumb contemptuously toward us—"come to you yesterday evening and lay claim to some of your cattle?"

"Yes; they come tearin' onto us and claimed that black and white steer over there, and some half a dozen yearlin's and two-year-olds. And when I wouldn't let 'em ride right in and cut out what they wanted, they ripped and cussed around like all git-out. First they threatened to shoot us. And when they found we wouldn't bulldoze worth a cent, they rode off swearin' they'd sic' the sheriff on us. And they've been as good as their word about that, I see."

This was too much. Neither Frank nor I ever used profanity under any circumstances. But we could use pretty vigorous language sometimes, when our tempers blazed up; and this was one of the times.

"Well, you're the biggest liar!" I burst out, hotly.

But Dugan stopped me with a motion of his hand. "Wait till it's your put-in," he ordered, in tones that did not soothe my already sorely tried temper.

"Are there any cattle out of this drove that were in it yesterday?" he inquired.

The drover hesitated, as if from the desire of a conscientious man to be very careful in his statements.

"Nary hoof," he declared. "We bought a few late yesterday evenin' and fifteen or twenty head more this mornin', but nary cow-brute did we let go. Ain't that so, boys?" he appealed to his fellow-prisoners.

Both declared unhesitatingly that he spoke the truth. Frank started to say something, and so did I; but Dugan, without looking at us, cut us off with a contemptuous gesture.

"I believe every word you say, men. And I owe all three of you an apology for stopping you as I did. But I've been imposed on. You can go on about your business now. And as for you chaps," he sneered, turning to Frank and me, "I've half a mind to arrest both of you and clap you in jail, and let you lay there a few weeks, just to learn you not to act so smart next time."

This was said in a malicious, spiteful way, which the words alone give little impression of.

I was astounded at the turn affairs had taken. And having no doubt that the sheriff's power in such matters was little short of absolute, I dared not open my mouth. But Frank, the son of a justice of the peace, had picked up numerous scraps of law in his father's court, and understood his rights better.

"Put us in jail if you dare!" he returned, angrily. "We haven't violated any law, and we've got plenty of friends that will stand by us till the last. Nice suit for damages you'll have on your hands—you and your bondsmen! And you'll pay us a hundred dollars in gold for every day we spend behind bars."

Dugan sneered, and his deputies and the cattle-men laughed loudly, derisively. The cattle-men could well afford to laugh. But the officers made no move to arrest us.

Frank turned his horse. "Let's be riding, Travis. When the of-

ficers of the law take sides with thieves to cheat honest people, it's high time for honest people to be hustling for themselves."

We started back the road, followed by the jeers of Dugan's party and the thieves. Once I turned to reply, sarcastically, but Frank stopped me.

"Don't waste breath on such fellows," he said aloud. Then he added, in a lower tone: "We'd better travel from here as fast as we can. The officers will soon go, and then that robber-gang will be none too good to follow us and shoot us down, for spite. I've heard of such things more than once."

Soon we noticed the sheriff's party following. Not caring to come in contact with them again, we rode fast enough to leave them far behind.

"Disgusting, isn't it?" I remarked, as we trotted along. "Excuse me from any further dealings with that kind of fellows. Sheriffs and deputy sheriffs are sorry truck anyhow," I added, with the natural tendency of youth to jump at hasty and sweeping conclusions.

"That they are!" Frank agreed with me, in hearty disgust. "We could have done better by ourselves."

"We couldn't possibly have done worse," I declared.

"Now Thavis, the question is: What became of those cattle?"

Both of us studied long and hard before attempting to answer it.

"That gang may have sold them to somebody along the road," finally suggested Frank.

"Or that other man that was with the outfit yesterday may have driven them off some other way," was my surmise.

"Yes, either of those things might have happened, Travis. And then comes another question: If that man drove them off where will he drive them to?"

"He's likely to follow some round-about course till the danger blows over, and then circle back to the drove."

"If we knew he'd do that, we ought to be following on."

"Yes, if we knew, Frank. But we don't know—we can't know till we find out. We'd better ride on back till we run across the cattle themselves, or learn what's gone with them. Even if we don't find them, we ought to stumble onto their trail somewhere. Then we'll not be running around blindfolded."

"That's right, I guess. We'd better try to strike the scent again. Old Lep's an easy brute to track. He's so noticeable that wherever he passes in daylight you can get news of him. And we ought to be expert trailers by this time—hard to shake off."

So we followed back the road, seeking diligently, searching tirelessly, for the lost trail. House after house, house after house we inquired at. Though every farmer recalled the drove of cattle, nobody seemed to have caught even a glimpse of Lep. But our persevering search was not to go unrewarded.

CHAPTER XV.

DRIVING AWAY OUR OWN CATTLE.

AT last, just as night was settling down, we halted at a neat-looking farm-house set in the midst of a grove of hackberries; and there, in reply to our questions, we learned what we were so anxious to learn.

"Do I recollect any longhorned, spotted steer in that bunch of cattle? Well, I ruther guess I do," the farmer at the woodpile assured us. "Couldn't well help noticin' that animal. He was mostly white, with reddish-brown spots and wore a bell. He was in the herd when it stopped here, but not when it moved on."

And then, in answer to our eager questions, the man threw down his ax and came out to explain.

"I'll tell you how it was. While the first drove was standin' here another drove not quite as big happened along, and the owner of it wanted to buy some cattle. I told 'im I'd just parted with the last hoof I had to spare. I'd sold five head to the first man. But the first buyer he spoke up and said ruther than have the other fellow disappointed, he'd sell 'im a few cattle. So they dickered around a while, and finally traded. I saw the money change hands. One of the cattle that changed owners was that big, spotted steer. There was six or eight others went with 'im; but I didn't notice any of the rest of 'em very close."

"What way did he drive from here—the man that bought the spotted steer?" I inquired.

"That outfit come along that cross-road there, and kept on west from here."

"And that's the way our cattle went," remarked Frank.

"No doubt about it," I answered.

"Did any of the hands desert the first drove and take up with the other?" questioned Frank.

The man shook his head. "No changin' hands that I saw."

"How many men were with the first drove?" I wanted to know.

"Three, not countin' the wagon-driver; and they all went on with it."

"So the man we'd seen at the water-mill must have left the outfit before they got this far," remarked Frank.

The farmer was evidently getting very curious to know what all these inquiries meant. And we now explained exactly how matters stood, dwelling particularly on our experiences with the cattle-thieves and the sheriff.

"That fellow Dugan is a slow-poke and a cross-patch and a fool to boot," the man declared, indignantly. "I said so before he was elected, and I still stand by it. I worked ag'inst 'im the last time, and I expect to fight 'im harder if he ever tries for office again. He's a disgrace to the county."

We were now about to start out on the other road, on the trail of our cattle, but the farmer would not hear to our riding any farther tonight. So we staid with him. Next morning he announced:

"If you boys just say the word, I'll saddle my horse and ride to town with you, and we'll make that fellow Dugan do something, whether he wants to or not; or we'll know the reason why."

"We're many times obliged to you, sir," replied Frank. "But we both got all we wanted of that bunch of slowness. Even if he tried

to do anything, our cattle could be run all the way to Mexico before he could get well in motion."

"That's all so—every word of it," agreed the farmer.

"Our cattle have got into honest hands now, I hope, and we oughtn't to have much trouble getting possession of them when we once overtake them," I remarked.

The farmer scratched his head, doubtfully. "I wouldn't be too dead certain about the honest part," he replied. "The man that bought your cattle may be as honest as the day is long—or he may not. I didn't notice anything suspicious about 'im. But I didn't notice anything suspicious about the other fellows, either. They may all be buyin' some cattle and pickin' up some the easiest way they can. And the whole business looks suspicious to me now. That's an old trick for cattle-thieves to meet openly somewhere and swap stolen stock; so that if any of 'em get caught, they can prove by good witnesses that they bought every hoof in their herds."

When we had saddled and mounted and were about to ride away, the farmer said:

"Well, I hope you'll find your cattle, and get 'em without much trouble. But I doubt if you will. Whatever you do, keep your eyes open. Cattle-thieves are desperate fellows, most of 'em; and they're dangerous for unarmed boys to deal with, especially out in that thin-settled country where you'll be likely to overhaul 'em. Between murder and the penitentiary, they'll choose murder every pop. If I can be of any help to you, don't fail to let me know. I'll go with you any time, day or night, rain or shine. And so will some of my neighbors. We don't love a horse-thief or a cattle-thief around here."

We thanked him warmly, and were quickly riding away, on the new-found trail of our cattle. Our road was one we had never traveled till now, and our present course was almost due west.

"What shall we do when we run onto that outfit?" I inquired of my traveling companion.

"That's a riddle for us to solve. But they've got thirty hours the start, and maybe thirty or forty miles, and there'll be plenty of time to think up something. Unless they lie by somewhere, it may take us two or three days to overhaul them. We don't want to ride too hard."

"No. We mustn't break our horses down. But there's one thing I've already decided, Frank. From here on we depend on ourselves. No more leaning on broken sticks of sheriffs for me."

"Nor for me," he agreed, heartily enough.

All day long, save only for a short rest and grazing spell at noon, we followed the trail of the moving cattle. But they were marching briskly, and were still a good many miles in the lead when night called a halt on us. We camped near a farm-house, going to the house for our supper and for feed for our horses.

Another day, from sunup till sundown, we rode the trail, still without overtaking the drove. During the last few days we had seen little besides open, comparatively level country. But late this last afternoon we entered a rougher region. Here the settlements were scattering, and the country was largely given up to stock-raising.

Night found us a few miles from any house, and we camped in a little circular patch of prairie, hedged in for the most part with thickets of dogwood and green-briers.

At the last cross-roads store we had bought some cheese and crackers and a chunk of dried beef. But I was hungry for fresh meat. Snatching Frank's six-shooter out of the saddle-bags, I whistled to Vic and started off in the quest of game. Fifteen minutes later I had returned with two squirrels, one of which we broiled and ate for supper and the other for breakfast.

The drove we were trailing was now only a few miles ahead, as we learned by inquiring at the first house we came to next morning. The owner of the drove had stopped there to buy some steers, and we learned by chance that his name was Hart. We might have overtaken the party by noon; but for some reason we slackened our speed. Our nooning-place was a dry camp, but about three o'clock we came to a clear, running creek.

"Look here, Frank," said I, "we're right on the heels of that outfit, and still we don't know what we're going to do when we come up with it. Why not lie by here till morning? The rest will be good for our horses. And by morning we ought to know—must know just what to do and say when we find our cattle."

My friend was willing enough, and we went into camp a few hundred yards from the road. First we found a deep place and had a good swim, amusing ourselves in the clear, cool stream for an hour or two. Then, having no change of clothes with us, we washed our underclothes, shirts and socks as thoroughly as we could in the cold water. We had done this once before, while flood-bound on the Cowhouse. Afterwards, clad in nothing but our pantaloons, we hung our clothes on some bushes in the sunshine to dry, and then retreated to the shade to keep from blistering.

Now we threw ourselves down on the grass, by our saddles, and fell to debating the hard question we had stopped there to decide. The horses were grazing, and Vic, weary after much traveling, was sound asleep and slept till late.

When morning came, we had still not decided upon any definite plan of action. However, we would push on till we overtook the drove, and then let circumstances determine our course. Much would depend upon the estimate we formed of Hart, the owner of the drove. If we believed him to be an honest man, the matter would be simple enough. But if he seemed of doubtful character—

That problem was still too hard for us, but we rode on nevertheless. We must have been only two or three miles behind the cattle when, between nine and ten o'clock, we came to a log schoolhouse in the woods by the roadside. Wagons were standing around and horses were hitched to trees; and a little crowd of people had assembled, not in the schoolhouse, but under a brush-shed, or arbor, in front of the door. They were singing earnestly as we rode by.

"Did you know it was Sunday?" asked Frank.

"No; I'd forgot all about the days of the week. Wish we had time to stop. I always go to Sunday-school and preaching when I'm home."

"So do I. Let's stop anyhow. It don't seem just the thing to be hunting cattle on Sunday. We can overhaul that drove by noon tomorrow."

"I don't know so well about that, Frank. Sunday or not, it seems necessary for us to do some traveling today. But we might stop for Sunday-school, and for preaching if there is preaching, and then ride on. We can keep close behind the cattle that way."

"All right. That's what we'll do."

We had soon unsaddled and lariatied out our horses, and hung up our saddles, and were back at the arbor. We had no coats, and our clothes were not all that could be desired for the occasion. But clothes cut a very small figure in frontier meetings. Few of the men and boys present were dressed any better than we were.

Sunday-school had just begun, and we went under the arbor and seated ourselves on a log, flattened a little on top with an ax for the purpose. We sat down in the rear of everybody else, but were soon invited into a class, and went. After Sunday-school there was

a sermon. And after the sermon we started for our horses, but a settler followed us and brought us back.

"This is a basket-meetin'," he informed us. "There'll be plenty for everybody, and to spare. And nobody ain't allowed to leave without his dinner."

So we ate with the crowd under the arbor. And very nicely they treated us. We were the only strangers present, it seems, and they vied with one another in looking after our wants. We had intended to take the road very soon after dinner, but were prevailed upon to wait till after the afternoon sermon, at three o'clock. When the services had ended, we saddled up and rode on our way.

Now we traveled faster than usual, to make up for lost time; and we intended to keep riding for at least two hours of the night. But half an hour after dark we saw a light glimmering ahead, and presently found ourselves opposite a considerable camp.

The camp was perhaps two hundred yards from the road, in a little cove set back among the hills. A good-sized camp-fire was burning, and several men, ghostly figures in the reddish light, were moving back and forth around it. One of them, a negro, was cooking supper. Saddles lay scattered about, and a covered wagon, dimly visible, stood not many yards back. Some horses could be made out, and the occasional lowing of unseen cattle came from somewhere beyond the camp.

"Here they are, Frank," said I, reining up. "We've overhauled them at last."

"That's what we have. They don't seem to have made many miles today. But they must have traveled late, or they'd have had supper over before now."

"Shall we turn out and camp with them?"

"Let's see. No, I'm for riding ahead. I'd rather come onto the outfit in daylight. We don't know what kind of fellows they are. If they're thieves, they might smell a mouse if we stopped there to-night."

"That's so. But how do we know our cattle are there? Stolen animals change hands often, they say. They're too hot to hold long. If we could just find out—"

Here the deep tones of a big bell broke out on the night, ringing as if the wearer, while lying down, had turned his head to lick himself.

"Yes, they're there!" I exclaimed, but cautiously. "That's Lep's bell. I'd know that bell at midnight in Africa."

"Well, if Lep's there, the others are close around, I guess. So we needn't worry about that."

Soon we were riding on. The bell rang again, more than once, and as I listened to it I could not help saying:

"If we only—if we only had those three cattle out!"

"Yes, if we just had!" echoed Frank. "Let's hope that by this time tomorrow night we may have them out and a good long stretch on the road toward home."

Three-quarters of a mile farther on we turned aside, up into another cove, and camped for the night. After eating a cold supper, we stretched ourselves on our blankets and talked over the situation. And a very puzzling, worrying situation we found it. Now that the critical time was almost upon us, we found ourselves growing anxious and nervous, and more or less excited.

Bright and early next morning we were awake and astir. But instead of taking the road, we remained quietly in camp. It was an hour or two later when the drove marched by. A strip of woods hid us from anybody passing along the road, but we could distinctly hear the shouts of the drivers, the ding-donging of Lep's bell, the lowing of the cattle, and even the trampling of many hoofed feet.

While the procession was moving by, Frank was busy reloading some empty chambers of his six-shooter.

"What's that for?" I wanted to know.

"Oh, nothing in particular. But this is a wild country, and we don't know what we may run against out here. It's just as well to be prepared. No use being left at the mercy of a gang of cattle-thieves, if that's what they are."

Now we mounted and returned to the road. The cattle were not far ahead. The shouts of the cowboys could still be heard, rebounding from hill to hill.

First we overtook the wagon. After a few words with its black driver we rode on, and a little later came up with the cattle.

There were four men in charge of the drove, and the first thing we noticed about them was that every one had a six-shooter belted around him. There was nothing unlawful in this. In enacting law against weapon-carrying the legislature had exempted the western portion of the state. And we had recently crossed the dividing line. While I understood the habits of cowboys, from having been born among them, the fact that they had taken the first lawful opportunity to buckle on their weapons did not, as it seemed to me, speak very favorably of their peaceful intentions.

One of the men—we soon learned that it was Hart, the proprietor—was riding behind the cattle; and we rode up and engaged him in conversation.

"Where are you driving your cattle from?" I inquired.

"From wherever we can pick them up. This is a buyin' round-up we're on now."

"And where are you taking them to?" asked Frank.

"To my ranch, out beyond Fort Cencho. It's a good distance out—entirely beyond the settlements. We're movin' in that direction now, but we expect to wind about a good deal before we get there. I want to take in as many cattle as I can, at reasonable prices."

"About what are you paying for cattle these days?" inquired Frank. It was a question that any farmer or stock-raiser would be apt to ask.

"Well, that, of course, depends on what they are, their ages, and so forth."

"That spotted steer over yonder with the bell on—what do you count him worth?" I ventured to inquire, with affected carelessness.

"Well, I forked over twenty dollars for him, only three or four days ago. But that was dirt-cheap. He's worth twice that if he's worth a cent. He's broke to work. His neck will tell you that. I got 'im from a buyer that didn't have any use for 'im. Wouldn't have bought 'im if I hadn't got 'im at a bargain. Ruther guess I'll sell 'im or swap 'im off to some farmer before we get out of the settlements. I'm not buyin' anything but young steers, and heifers and cows to take out to the ranch."

Hart now dashed out to whip back an animal that had broken away from the drove, and Frank and I were left alone together.

"Well, how do you size him up?" I inquired, in a low tone.

His brow wrinkled into a frown—a frown of doubt and indecision. "I can't make much out of him. What do you think?"

"He don't look to me like a very good man or a very bad man. Guess he's astraddle of the fence between straight and crooked."

"That must be about the way he looks to me. I don't believe he's dishonest enough to steal. But is he honest enough to give up stolen cattle that he has paid cash for?"

"He may be, but I doubt it. The only way to find out for certain is to try him."

"And if we do, we stand a fine chance to look into some more six-shooters."

"No more of that kind of thing for me, if you please. But if we don't lay claim to our cattle, what can we do?"

Frank looked worried. "Wish I knew," he said.

Hart now returned to the road. And soon he began to question us: "Which way you travelin', boys?"

"We're out for a little trip," Frank answered him. "Don't know yet just how far we'll go. Fine weather; crops all laid by; nothing much to do at home. We might as well see some of the country as not."

We rode on together for a short time, talking on various topics. Presently a steer left the drove, and Hart dashed away in furious pursuit. A cow made off on the other side, and I galloped round her and brought her back. Hart now returned to us and said:

"Reckon you boys wouldn't like a job at cattle-drivin', would you?"

"Well now, we might," I answered, turning questioning eyes toward Frank. This was something we had not foreseen.

"Don't know why we shouldn't," Frank replied, speaking to Hart; but his answer was also addressed to me—to the question I had looked.

"If you didn't want too much money, don't know but what I might use you for a while," remarked the drover. "There wouldn't be a great sight for you to do. We've got hands enough to look after this little bunch as it is now. Only about two hundred and fifty head in it, all told. But I expect to buy a few hundred head more. And if I had other hands, I could run off through the country and find more cattle than I can pick up along the main-traveled road. We couldn't move as fast as we're movin' now, but we'd get more cattle in the same length of time. What do you want a month?"

"How much can you pay?" answered Frank.

"Would fifteen dollars be enough?"

"Couldn't you make it twenty?"

"Don't believe I could stretch it to that, considerin' the easy work. We're not rushin' things much this trip. But as you've got your own horses and saddles, I might add a dollar or two—say seventeen a month. Well, call it eighteen."

"How long will you want us?" I questioned.

"Until we get through buyin', and strike the trail for the ranch. I might even take you on up there if you wanted to go. But of course you can drop out whenever you feel like it."

Frank and I considered the offer. I had already made up my mind to accept it, less for the sake of the wages than because of the opportunity afforded us to stay with our cattle till we could get possession of them.

"Well, what do you say, Travis?" asked Frank, turning to me.

"We're going in the same direction anyway. Let's call it a bargain."

"All right. A bargain it is," Frank remarked to the drover. "When do you want us to start in?"

"Right away, if you feel like it. After dinner I want to take two of the boys and run off into the country a few miles, to see what we can round up. The rest of you can keep the cattle joggin' along till we overhaul you. Better drop back and leave your saddle-bags and things in the wagon."

We rode back, and after ridding ourselves of all unnecessary encumbrances we were soon up with the drove again, busy, shouting cowboys now.

Thus it came about that, instead of claiming our cattle and starting home with them, we had actually hired ourselves to the drover to help drive them farther away.

CHAPTER XVI.

WHERE HEROES HAD FALLEN.

NOT till our party had halted for noon could Frank and I snatch a chance to talk over the strange situation in which we now found ourselves. Soon after dinner Hart, accompanied by two of his cowboys, Ame Watson and Ben Dankins, rode off on a hunt for cattle that could be bought. The other hand, Newt Lindsay, remained at the camp to help us keep watch over the drove.

But a short while after Hart had gone Newt, remarking that there was little to do, and that he was about to go to sleep, strolled away up the creek in quest of ripe grapes. Sam, the black cook, having washed and put away the few dinner-dishes and pots and pans cut himself a dogwood fishing-pole, tied a line to the little end of it, and set off down the valley.

"Reckon little mess o' fish taste mighty good 'long 'bout supper-time," he remarked as he passed us. "Dey bites de bes' kin' in de cool, shady places, fish does," he added, suggestively.

Most of the cattle were standing or lying in the shade, lazily switching flies. Vic was exploring the near-by woods for squirrels. Frank and I had resaddled our horses, but had turned them loose to graze, while we ourselves took refuge in the friendly shadow of a gigantic sycamore.

"Well, here we are," I remarked, soon after we had been left alone.

"Yes, here we are," repeated Frank. "There lie our cattle, there stand our horses, already saddled, and there's the road toward home. What's to hinder us from jumping into our saddles, driving up our cattle, and taking the back trail?"

"Sure enough, what is to hinder us?" I answered. "Not a thing in the world that I can see—except one."

"That's right—except one," agreed Frank. "When a man hires us to take care of his cattle, and trusts us, we can't play him that kind of a mean trick."

"No, we couldn't sneak off like that. The gate's open, but there are bars behind it, and they're still up. It looks like a fine chance to get out of the pen, but it's not half as good as it looks. We've got to wait for something better."

"Still it's a curious shape affairs have worked themselves into. I couldn't have imagined such a thing as this yesterday."

"Though we can't do as we please with our cattle, they're actually in our hands. And that's something gained. It's more than we've been able to say before since we started from home."

"Yes, we've made a long step forward there, Travis. We can look after them ourselves now, and see that they don't slip out of our fingers again. They're in our possession. Now the question comes: how can we get them under control, so that we can cut them out and drive for home with them?"

"That's a puzzle. The only way I can think of is to march straight up to Hart, put in our claim, and have it out with him then and there."

"But what will he say—and do?" asked Frank. "I have a suspicion that he's pretty hot-tempered, and that the fire flies when he gets mad."

"From several little things I saw, I'd guess him off about the same way. But what are we to do? We can't let him keep our cattle just to keep him in a good humor."

"No, of course not. Still, I'd rather get a little better acquainted with him, and on friendlier terms with him, before we stir him up. He seems like a pretty square sort of a man, but we may have our eyes opened by the time we've worked for him a few days."

"I'll tell you, Frank. We're earning fair wages now; and as long as that lasts I'm in no great rush to get home. Not much work to do there, for pay, this time of year. Suppose we stay with Hart a week or so, and see what will turn up. Maybe things will take some unexpected twist, like they did this morning."

"All right. That may prove the easiest way out of the woods," Frank agreed. And after a little more discussion, the subject was dropped for the time.

Newt, the grape-hunter, came back a good while later; and so, finally, did Sam the fisherman. Sam now began to harness his wagon-mules, and Newt and Frank and I punched up and rounded up the cattle and got them under way. This was according to our instructions.

About the middle of the afternoon we came upon Hart and his two hands, waiting by the roadside with a little bunch of cows and young cattle they had bought. The new cattle were thrust into the drove, and the three men made another short circuit striking the road again three or four miles ahead. The second time they returned empty-handed. But a little later Hart bought several yearlings from a settler living on our line of march.

All the new cattle had to be watched closely at first, to keep them from breaking out of the drove. Sometimes a rebellious animal would escape, and a lively chase would be necessary to bring him back. Once well away from their accustomed range, however, the new recruits seemed to become reconciled to the new order, and marched along quietly enough. With the exception of training these latest purchases to drive our work was comparatively easy.

We were now nearing the Colorado River. When night came down upon us, we had camped in sight of it; and next morning we marched across. From here on, if we had proceeded toward Hart's ranch, our course would have been due west, and parallel with the river. The Colorado, at our crossing-point, runs south; but a little farther north it bends almost at right angles, and above that for many miles its general course is east. The road we were now following was well-beaten and dusty. It was the Fort Concho trail. Hart's ranch, we were told, was situated on the Concho River, a tributary of the Colorado, two days' travel beyond the fort.

But instead of moving on toward Fort Concho, we now headed almost due south, in the direction of San Antonio.

The country was more or less broken, and rather thinly settled. But all the settlers were cattle-raisers, and most of them had at least a few head to sell. And that was what we were out for.

Hart now informed us that we would travel southward he did not know how far, then bend west and double back, striking Fort Concho trail twenty or thirty miles nearer the fort than where we had left it. The circuit he expected to make would occupy from a week to three weeks, according to the rapidity with which we accumulated cattle.

"Well, Frank, we're tied up for several days now, it seems," remarked I, the first time we were alone together after the turn southward. "We'd better not try to get our cattle away till this buying circuit winds up."

"No, I don't see that we can well," he answered, thoughtfully. "But we must be ready to cut loose and strike for home the first minute after we get back to that main-traveled trail."

I agreed with him; and again we dropped the subject for the present, though it was never out of our thoughts long at a time, I think.

Now we both wrote letters home and mailed them at the first post-office we came to. We explained that we had found the cattle at last, and had them with us; but that the man in whose drove they now were had offered us fair wages to accompany him on a little cattle-buying trip, and we would not start for home for a few days yet. As heretofore, we were careful to say, we would write at least a postal-card from every post-office on our route.

Not caring to worry our friends as we ourselves were worried, we did not inform them that our cattle were not yet actually in our possession, and that we did not know how we could get possession of them. On that point, however, we had fully made up our minds. Get possession of them we would, one way or another.

Sometimes, for a change, Frank and I rode out with Hart on his little side-trips, to help him drive back the cattle he bought. Usually, however, our work was with the main drove. At first Newt or one of the other cowboys always remained with us; but after two or three days Hart got sufficient confidence to leave the cattle in our care. We not only held them under herd during his absence, but we also did most of the driving, starting and stopping according to his instructions. For reasons that can easily be guessed, we were both eager to please our employer, and did the very best we could.

Every day we made two drives of ten to twelve miles each. By this plan the cattle were always either marching or grazing or resting; and they had no time left to grow restless. With the exception of those just turned into the drove, which had to be watched to keep them from breaking out or slipping off into the brush, they gave us far less trouble than we had expected.

One morning, three or four days after we had turned southward, Frank and I underwent a very unpleasant experience.

Immediately after breakfast Hart, accompanied by three cowboys, Ame and Ben and Newt, rode ahead to begin the day's buying. Having allowed the cattle to graze an hour or two longer, Frank and I rounded them up and drove on, followed by Sam with the wagon.

After traveling a few miles we overtook Hart, dismounted by the roadside, in front of a cabin. The three hands had ridden on, but Hart was talking to a settler, a big, bushy-bearded man dressed in pantaloons and shirt of soiled buckskin. Scarcely had the leaders marched by the cabin when Hart signaled a halt. We galloped around till we got ahead of the cattle, and quickly brought them to a standstill. Then Hart called out:

"Travis, I wish you'd ride in there and cut out that bell-steer for me."

Lep was the only belled animal in the drove. I pushed in among the cattle and brought him out, stopping him in front of the two men. Already I had serious misgivings, which increased to positive alarm when Hart turned to the settler and said:

"There's that work-steer. He's a good one, too. I'll either swap him for other cattle, or sell 'im, just as you please. He's the only animal in the drove that ever wore a yoke, I guess. If you've got an odd steer that will match 'im, he's worth every cent I ask for 'im, and more."

Then they proceeded to try to trade. I withdrew a few yards, but not out of ear-shot, and waited anxiously, almost in terror, as I

thought of the complicated situation that would follow the transfer of Lep to a stranger.

We had recently told Hart that we expected to stay with him at least till we touched the Fort Concho trail again. If Lep was sold or swapped off, he would be left here, while Frank's two animals would go on with the drove. What we ourselves should do under those circumstances there was no knowing. Bitterly I regretted now that we had not explained matters to Hart the day we hired ourselves to him, instead of weakly procrastinating as we had done.

Presently Frank rode over to me and said, in low tones:

"You know what's on foot there, don't you?"

"Yes, I do," I answered with some agitation.

"Do you think they'll make a bargain of it?"

"I believe they will, Frank."

"Then, if they do, we've got to blurt out the truth here and now, or forever hereafter keep our mouths shut. We won't dare hold it in a minute longer. If we keep silent and let that steer pass into the hands of an innocent purchaser, without making any claim or protest, you never can claim him, by law or any other way. Maybe your father could, but you can't."

Frank knew more of law than I did. But this view of the matter struck me at once as being at least the best kind of common-sense. And I know now that it is both good common-sense and good law.

Every word that reached our ears seemed to indicate that Hart and the settler were on the point of coming to an agreement. After listening a short time I said:

"If they trade I'll speak out right away. And you'd better claim your cattle, too. Hart will be mad, mad, mad when we step in and knock his trade in the head. And we can't blame him much."

"Mad's no name for it, Travis. He'll be crazy—wild. I'd rather punch a hornet's nest twenty times any day. He'll swear till the air's blue, and then tell us to make tracks. No doubt about that. But it will only serve us right. We oughtn't to have let this matter drag so long."

"Well, if he chases us off and our cattle with us, we can stand it," I said. "But if he holds our cattle—"

"Listen!" whispered Frank.

The settler and Hart had almost come to an understanding, as it seemed. But now, before closing the trade, the settler was walking around Lep, giving him a critical inspection.

And the inspection, it soon became evident, was not altogether satisfactory. Though he did not say so in so many words, I easily understood that he was afraid of Lep—afraid that the ox would prove vicious and give trouble under the yoke. Those horns did look threatening. On that point I could easily have relieved the man's fears; but, needless to say, I was as silent as a gate-post.

Seeing that the man in buckskin was trying to back out, Hart, who had only a limited stock of patience, promptly lost what little he had. He ignored the settler, but sprang upon the horse and shouted, with ill-concealed irritation:

"Drive on, boys! We've fooled away too much time here already!"

And drive on we did, with a hearty good will, glad to have Lep still in the drove; and even gladder, perhaps, to have escaped the fury of our quick-tempered employer.

"But the same trouble is liable to turn up again any day," Frank remarked to me, after Hart had left us. "And it'll be pretty sure to end differently next time. We'd better have a plain talk with Hart right soon."

"That's the thing. We'll have it just as soon as—as soon as we catch him in a good humor."

But a disagreeable duty is never made easier by being put off—rather harder. And from day to day we still kept postponing the dreaded interview. And the longer we delayed the harder it seemed to us to explain why we had not made our claim the first day instead of waiting all this time.

Our party kept on marching southward, from twenty to twenty-five miles a day; and every day we added twenty or thirty cattle to the drove. Soon we found ourselves but little more than a day's march from San Antonio.

Hart had not intended to travel any farther south. In fact, he had not at first expected to advance as far down as this. But, having a little business in San Antonio, he now decided to go on and look after it.

We went into camp a few miles north of the town one night. And next morning Hart, in company with Ben Dankins and Ame Watson, and followed by Sam with the wagon, set off in that direction. They would bring back some supplies.

It was about two o'clock when the party returned. Now Newt Lindsay, Frank and I got ready for a visit. Hart paid all of us some money, Frank and me ten dollars apiece; though we had not asked for it, and had no intention of spending much. We were going to see rather than to spend.

It was with feelings of the keenest interest that I rode into the historic old town. From my childhood I had heard much of it; and much I had read of it, in the History of Texas and elsewhere. "San Antone" all old Texans called it. It contained several thousand people, and was, at the time of our visit, without a railroad. In fact, it was a city set out in the wilderness. Its population was largely, though by no means wholly, made up of Mexicans.

In appearance it was scarcely an attractive place, even to our inexperienced eyes. We rode up and down its principal streets, and finally dismounted in a plaza. Most of the visting people present, except the Mexicans, seemed to be cowboys from the neighboring ranches.

One of the peculiar things we noticed in the streets was a wagon-train, loaded with barrels of flour, drawn by oxen, and driven by Mexican teamsters. It was just coming in from Austin, the nearest railroad point. Strictly speaking, it was only a cart-train. But every cart had a big frame on it, so that a huge wagon-load was deftly balanced on its two wheels. Each cart was pulled by several yoke of oxen; and the yokes, instead of having bows, were lashed to the oxen's horns.

"Did you ever hear tell of anything half as foolish?" laughed Frank.

"You needn't laugh. It's no laughing matter," I told him. "At least those oxen don't think so, I imagine."

"No, I'd say not," spoke up Newt. "It's about the same thing as if a man, instead of puttin' harness on his horses, was to hitch his halter-straps back to the wagon and make 'em pull by their noses."

"But why don't they learn better?" asked Frank. "I see other ox-teams here, working with yokes and bows."

"Oh, a Greaser never learns anything," replied Newt, contemptuously. "If he did, he wouldn't be a Greaser."

One place in San Antonio we all wanted to see—were resolved not to go back without seeing. And after looking over the city, and buying the few things we had need of, we directed our steps to the Alamo.

That thick-walled, battle-scarred old mission-house would have been

interesting in itself; but it was rendered many times more interesting to us because of one great historical event. For here, on the sixth of March, 1836, had fallen, after a bloody struggle, Colonel Travis and all the hundred and eighty-nine heroes who laid down their lives to cripple the power of Santa Anna and break the tyranny of Mexico.

The old building was at this time private property; but the man living there cheerfully showed us through. Strange feelings, which I shall not attempt to describe, thrilled me as I stood in the room where Davy Crockett, the famous backwoodsman and Congressman, had made his last stand, fighting with his clubbed, broken rifle till he was shot down. In another room we saw where Bowie, the man with the terrible knife, had risen from his sick bed to sell his life as dearly as possible.

"And how many Mexicans fell while they were storming this building?" inquired Frank.

"The official report, made by one of the Mexican generals, put their loss at about five hundred, I think," answered the owner of the building. "And that's the number given in most of the histories of Texas. But the alcalde that had charge of burying the dead always insisted that he buried fifteen hundred. Hard to say who told the truth. But five hundred or fifteen hundred, old Santy Anny needed every man of 'em about six weeks later, when Sam Houston turned on 'im at San Jacinto and literally wiped out his army, and took old Santy prisoner."

"The one big mistake Houston made was when he didn't introduce Santy Anny to the first good limb he come to, instead of turnin' 'im loose to live forty years longer," declared Newt, resentfully. For the treacherous, cruel Mexican general had long been an object of bitter hatred in Texas.

"Well, it's better to—to err on the side of mercy than against mercy," remarked Frank. And undoubtedly he was right.

We lingered about the Alamo till night was upon us, then mounted and rode back to camp.

CHAPTER XVII.

SOME STARTLING NEWS.

NEXT morning our party swung round and pointed our course toward the northwest. We moved steadily in that direction till we found ourselves among the mountains—the Hondo Mountains, if I have not forgotten—a region of beautiful scenery and clear, running streams. After passing through the mountainous country we veered to the northeast, marching by cattle-ranches, sheep-ranches and goat-ranches. Later we set our faces due north, our present course lying parallel with, and perhaps thirty miles west of, the route we had followed on our way down.

All the time our drove was swelling. Besides cattle, Hart was buying a few horses, whenever they were offered cheap. Horses and cattle were driven along together. Often other buyers brought cattle to our camp to sell; and unless they asked too much, Hart usually struck a bargain with them.

And no matter what he bought, he was very careful to require a bill of sale, signed by the seller, with a full description of every animal. When away from the wagon, Hart wrote the bills of sale himself; but for animals bought at the camp or on our line of march he usually asked me to write them, while he called out the marks and brands and other distinguishing features. These bills of sale were kept in a good-sized tin-box in the wagon. And it became one of my duties to look after the box and keep the papers in order.

Soon after the steadily rising number of our drove had passed six hundred Hart took on two more hands, both Mexicans. These new men were needed most at night. For though our cattle had stampeded only once, and that without running far or scattering much, there was no knowing when they would give us serious trouble. And common prudence required that a guard be kept over them all night long. Frank and I did our full share of this night-herding.

As we marched northward day after day, drawing nearer and nearer to the Fort Concho trail, from which we had started on this round, Frank and I grew more and more uncomfortable. Though by no means tired of a cowboy's life, we were now anxious to get started toward home; and the day was close at hand when we must have that long-dreaded, still-deferred interview with Hart. Again and again, when alone together, we berated ourselves for not having spoken sooner. But in spite of this, we were no less reluctant to speak now.

We had learned much about our employer during the two weeks we had been with him. He was a man of abundant energy, and of no small force of character. In appearance he was tall and well-built, with dark hair and mustache, and a strong, rather pleasant face. That is, it looked pleasant enough when lighted by good humor. At such times he was sensible and as reasonable a man as one could desire to deal with. And he could be very generous.

But his vices were as pronounced as his virtues. He had a fiery temper, easily aroused; and when once it was up, curses and abuses flew from him like sparks from a red-hot iron under the blacksmith's hammer. Every day or two we had a veritable thunder-storm of

wrath in the camp, with forked lightnings darting in every direction.

As yet Frank and I had escaped being struck. But we knew it was mostly by accident; for when once stirred up the ranchman was utterly unreasonable. The very thought of bringing down one of those tornadoes of temper on our heads made us shiver. And knowing the man as we now did, we knew as well as if we had tried it—or thought we knew—just what would happen when we laid claim to some of Hart's cattle, especially at this late hour.

"And yet we've just got to do something," Frank had declared again and again to me. And again and again I had agreed with him, or had declared the same thing to him. But we still put off the evil day as long as possible.

It was not only Hart's anger that we feared, though we half expected him to order us out of the camp. But neither of us believed for a moment that he would surrender the cattle to us. And we had to admit to ourselves that our weak procrastination had given him just grounds for refusing to believe our story.

One day, while our party was in camp, Frank and I walked down to a creek to wash our hands and faces, and Newt Lindsay soon followed us. He was next in age to us, being only twenty-two or twenty-three. The other men were all between thirty and forty.

"Have you two boys got good homes?" Newt inquired, rather wistfully it seemed to me, while we were all standing near the water's edge, wiping our faces on our handkerchiefs.

We were a little surprised, but both of us assured him that we had.

"Then, if you'll take a fool's advice, you'll go back as straight as you can ride, and stay there. Whether you know it or not, there's a lot of crooked work goin' on in connection with this cattle-business."

We had not needed his good advice, as it happened; but we appreciated his interest in us, and had a better opinion of him for having offered it. But his last remark puzzled us.

"Crooked work! What do you mean by that?" asked Frank.

Newt was slow to reply, and I took occasion to say:

"Everything I've seen seems to be straight enough."

But even as I spoke I recalled that Hart had abused Newt shamefully that morning, in a fit of anger; and naturally the young fellow was feeling bitter over it.

"Hain't you boys seen through this thing yet?" he demanded.

"Through what thing, Newt?" I hastened to ask.

"Can you keep a secret?"

"Of course we can," Frank answered.

"We're as dumb as an ash-hopper," I assured him.

"If Hart even guessed what I'm tellin' you, he'd be mad enough to empty his six-shooter into me. But you boys ought to know what you've got mixed up with. That's why I'm tellin' you this. The fact is—" Then he dropped his voice cautiously and began again: "The fact is, about half the cattle in this drove have been stole."

"What!" Frank burst out, in startled tones.

"Hush! Not so loud," cautioned Newt.

"How can that be?" I questioned. "We've seen him buy at least two-thirds of the drove—seen it with our own eyes."

"Of course you have. That's one thing you're here for—to see Hart buy these cattle, and to witness his bills of sale. Hart don't steal cattle himself, or anything else—not Hart. He's altogether too sharp for that. He buys the cattle and pays for 'em. And he takes a bill of sale for every hoof that comes into this drove, too."

"Yes, and he does more than that," I hastened to say. "Unless the man that wants to sell says he has raised the animal, or has

owned it for a year or two, Hart always demands to see his bill of sale for it. I never saw a more cautious man."

"Oh yes, he's as cautious as they make 'em, that Jasper Hart—and as sly. Did you ever see a trade spoilt because the owner couldn't fish up a bill of sale? No, you never did; and what's more, you never will. Anybody can write a bill of sale, and anybody can sign one. But these fellows that drive to 'im—where do they find their cattle? Why, wherever they happen onto 'em, of course—on the prairie, or in the woods, or anywhere else. Hain't you noticed how ga'nt some of the animals look? What could make cattle look ga'nt this time of the year, when there's a world of grass everywhere?"

"Well, what could?" Frank put the question.

"Nothin' in the world but hard drivin'. But Hart don't see that. He shuts his eyes. If he got arrested for stealin' any particular animal, he could prove p'int-blank that he bought it and paid for it. Part of the cattle he does buy from their owners, of course; and he pays a fair price for 'em, too. But fully as many more he buys from the thieves. And he gets 'em for about half what they're worth, because they've been rounded up between two days. Hain't you noticed the big difference in prices?"

"Yes, I have," was my reply. "But I'd never thought much about it before. How long have you been with him, Newt?"

"Nearly a year. This is the third cattle-buyin' trip I've made from the ranch."

"And have you understood all the time that he was carrying on crooked business?" Frank wanted to know, suspiciously.

"Of course not. For a good while I thought everything was as straight as a square. Then I sort of begun to smell a mouse. And at last it got through my thick head that the main part of the business was crooked. I know that well enough now, but I couldn't prove it. In fact, I don't know that I could go into court and swear that I've ever seen a solitary thing that the law could get a hold of. For I never have. I've never been asked to do any dirty work, and I've never seen any of it done—openly."

"Couldn't you be mistaken about there being any dirty work?" I questioned him.

"Yes, I could be, but I'm not. For a good while I tried to persuade myself that I was—just as long as I could. I've no more doubt that I'm right than I have that the sun will rise tomorrow mornin'. That's why I advised you boys to go back home."

"Your advice was very good, and we thank you for it," Frank assured him. "But wouldn't it be just as good for yourself as for us?"

"Don't know but what it would."

"If you know Hart to be a receiver of stolen property, I don't understand how you can stay with him," said I. "We're not going to hang around this outfit a minute longer than we can get away."

"That's a sensible decision," declared Newt. "As for me, there's good reasons why I shouldn't cut loose from this layout just yet a while. One of 'em is: I promised Hart to stick to 'im till the end of this trip. If I was to run off and leave 'im where we are now, he'd be mad as blazes—mad enough to plug me with lead, I guess. He has stuck lead into two or three men already, I've heard tell. Maybe they needed all they got though."

"He has! So that's the kind of fellow we've run up against, is it?" Frank remarked, thoughtfully.

Soon Newt started back to the camp, and Frank and I followed, more slowly.

"I'm afraid we've got ourselves into a ticklish place," my companion in trouble remarked.

"Ticklish or what not, we've got to crawl out of it right away," I

answered. "That is, if it's as bad as Newt says. In fact, we've got to get out of it anyhow."

"That's right. I won't touch stolen property with a thirty-foot pole. But if it was an up-hill job to tell Hart before, when we thought him an honest man, what is it now, after we've just learned that—after we've just learned what we have?"

"Yes, I know. But Newt may be mistaken, or partly mistaken. He's sore at Hart now, and he won't believe anything good about him. But it's time for us to get our cattle and start home anyway, and we might as well take the bull by the horns at once."

"I'm with you there, Travis. So let's fix a time for our talk with Hart, and have the matter over with, come what will."

"All right. Tonight after supper—how will that do?"

"Tonight after supper will suit me. And tonight after supper it shall be. Don't forget; no flinching for us this time. We've dodged and flinched too much already."

We had fully made up our minds, and would doubtless have carried out our purpose to have the interview, much as we dreaded it. But before the appointed hour, something occurred which we had not foreseen—something that changed our plans.

Our talk with Newt Lindsay took place at noon. An hour or so later, but before we had begun the afternoon drive, two horsemen appeared suddenly at our camp, bursting out of the brush behind us. Plainly they had been riding hard. Reining up, they swept our numerous, grazing drove with their eyes, and presently grew much excited.

"What are you doin' with my cattle in that herd?" one of them demanded, angrily. In fact, he almost shouted it. "Nice gang of thieves, you air!"

Hart and all the cowboys except one of the Mexicans, Jose by name, and Frank and me, had saddled their horses and were just mounting, ready for another buying trip. Hart was still on the ground, but he now leaped into the saddle, his face aflame.

"I've paid good money for every hoof in that drove; and what's more, I've got the paper to show for it," he replied, with suppressed but very evident anger. To me he looked decidedly dangerous.

"I don't care a rip what you've paid or what you hain't paid!" the irate settler shouted. "What I know is, I count five cattle of mine in that herd, and I'm goin' to have 'em!"

"Where's your proof?" demanded the ranchman, with more self-control than I had thought him capable of. But a glance at his face told me that it was the self-control of a thunderstorm not quite ready to burst.

"Proof!" fairly yelled the settler, in a fury. "What do I care about proof? Don't I see my own cattle with my own eyes? What better proof do I want?"

"Do you take me for a fool—for a big enough fool to hand over cattle to every sharp that bobs up and lays claim to 'em?" demanded Hart, sarcastically. "I've got good, solid proof that says they're mine. If you've got better proof that they belong to you, trot it out!"

"Don't I know my own cattle? Do I have to ask any cattle-thief what I can do with what's mine?" blustered the settler, with many savage oaths.

"Bet your bottom dollar we don't!" answered the other settler. "Our cattle are in that herd, and we're goin' to have 'em here and now. And we'll let daylight shine clear through the first fool that tries to head us off!"

"That we will!" shouted his companion. And they both started to spur right into the drove.

Ame Watson and Ben Dankens were sitting on their horses, but a

few yards from Hart. I saw him give them a sign. And scarcely had the settlers started toward the cattle when three six-shooters came out of three holsters and covered them.

"Hold up there! Up with your hands, both of you!" ordered Hart, so sternly, threateningly, that the angry pair stopped short. Turning, they found themselves facing the three cocked weapons.

Both men were armed, and I have never doubted that they would have made a desperate fight if given half a chance. But, not foreseeing what would happen, they had allowed themselves to be caught off their guard. So their hands went up, though reluctantly.

Ben Dankens rode near and relieved one of the men of his six-shooter, while Hart himself disarmed the other man. Hart looked furious. Suddenly he thrust his own cocked six-shooter against the breast of the man who had blustered so much.

"Do you think you own any cattle in this layout?" he demanded, fiercely. Something in the way he hissed the words reminded me of an enraged snake about to strike.

The blusterer—a blusterer no longer—turned an ashen gray under his coat of tan. For several moments he seemed unable to speak, and I half expected to hear the six-shooter speak for him.

"I'm waivin' all claims," he finally answered, half doggedly, though the quaver in his voice told that he fully realized how close to death's door he was standing.

"Do you think you can take the road you came, and travel it till sundown without pullin' a rein?"

"If I git a chanct I can."

Hart now turned his pistol toward the other man, and propounded similar questions. This fellow was worse frightened than his blustering companion. He looked almost ghastly, and his words seemed to stick in his throat. But he promised everything demanded of him—would have promised much more, doubtless. And no one hearing him could have doubted that, just then at least, he fully intended to abide by his promise.

"Then go! Vamoose! Ride for your lives!" roared Hart. "And don't let me ketch you in a hundred miles of this outfit again, or I'll—" He added a lengthy string of profane threats.

Instantly the two settlers wheeled their horses and dashed back the road at a gallop. Having feared a tragedy, I was wonderfully relieved to see them escape unharmed. We watched them till they had disappeared in the windings of the brush-bordered road. But just as they were disappearing, the blusterer could not resist the temptation to look back and shout:

"We'll meet some other day!"

Promptly Hart spurred after him, the six-shooter still in his hand.

"The crazy wind-bag! Why didn't he keep his big mouth shut?" muttered Newt to me.

I was much frightened for the man. But Hart followed only a hundred or two yards, then fired two shots, probably over their heads, and turned back.

"The last we'll see of that pair of scared rabbits," he remarked as he cantered up to us, laughing a wicked laugh.

"I wouldn't be too almighty shore about that, Hart," remarked Ben. "They're goin' to make trouble for us if they can. And I ruther guess they can."

Hart looked thoughtful for a few moments, then laughed again, a reckless, defiant laugh.

"Oh well, let 'em try it if they want to! We'll give 'em as good as they send! Well, time for us to be on the jump, boys. The rest of you let the cattle graze an hour or so longer, then round up and drive on."

CHAPTER XVIII.

PREPARATIONS TO ESCAPE.

SOON after Hart and his four cowboys had ridden away Frank, giving me a significant look, sauntered off from the camp toward a little grove. I soon followed him. When we were beyond the hearing of Jose the Mexican and Sam the cook, who were playing mumblety-peg, I turned and said:

"Well, what do you think now?"

"I think—I think—oh, I don't know what I do think!" he exclaimed, impatiently. "But I know we don't want to have any talk with Hart."

"Why not?"

"Because—well, I don't care to leave this camp like those two fellows left it today. Do you?"

"Would it be as bad as that with us, do you think?"

"It might be worse, for all I know. Did you see how deathly pale those men turned?"

"Yes. I want to dodge out of all such experiences as that. The one we went through was bad enough. This must have been a hundred times worse. But if we don't talk with Hart what can we do? I heard him say we ought to strike the Fort Concho trail before tomorrow night. We've got to do something and do it quick."

"That's right. We've got to do something, and do it quick," repeated Frank, thoughtfully.

"There are two things already nailed down hard," I went on. "One is that we don't dare hang around this outfit more than a few hours longer; and the other, that we can't go home without those cattle."

Frank nodded. "So it seems that the only road left open for us is to slip our cattle out the first chance we get, then strike the trail for home and travel it at a hot gait."

"Yes, that's the only thing we can do. Now the question is: When shall we make the start?"

"Let's say tomorrow after dinner or tomorrow night."

"Why not today or tonight, Frank?"

"Well, we might go tonight. But tomorrow night will be better, because we'll be on that main-traveled road, the Fort Concho trail, and we won't stand much chance of getting lost. And we ought to have another talk with Newt. He's as sour as vinegar at Hart just now, and maybe he'll lend us a hand in slipping our cattle out."

"Can we trust him?"

"I don't see why we shouldn't."

"You think he won't betray us to Hart?"

"Not while he's as sore as he was at noon. He'd see Hart hung higher than Haman before he'd open his mouth to him."

"But he may thaw into a better humor by night. Hart's pretty smooth at blarneying people after he walks over them."

"Not so soon, I guess. But we can feel of Newt first, and make sure as to how he stands. If he has still got his teeth on edge we'd better let him into our secret, and then ask his advice and get him to help us if we can."

This I agreed to. Our conversation now turned to the exciting event we had just witnessed. Our sympathies went out largely to-

ward the two men; for we ourselves had run the gauntlet of a similar experience. If they had acted less foolishly we should have sympathized with them more.

Soon after the time drew near to get the cattle in motion, and we sauntered back to the camp.

After supper that same day Frank and I noticed Newt lariatting a horse a hundred yards or so from the camp, and strolled out in that direction.

"Well, what's your opinion now, boys?" was the question that greeted us as we walked up to him. "Was I right or not right?"

"Would you say they were frauds—those fellows?" I inquired.

"No, I don't—not a bit of it. They just saw their cattle in the drove and got mad about it, as any other man would that had any spunk. And if all the real owners of these cattle happened along about the same time—well, let me be a long ways from here before that comes to pass. This particular part of the country will be red-hot. What have you boys concluded to do?"

"That's what we find hard to decide," answered Frank.

"Well, you know your own business, of course. But if you're wise you'll be mighty shy of this outfit from now on. And you won't wait a minute longer than you have to. We're standin' right square on top of a powder-mine."

"How's that?" inquired Frank.

"Why, nine chances out of ten them two fellows will come back. And they won't come by themselves, neither. That's why I advise you boys to make yourselves scarce."

"Will it be any more dangerous for us than for you?"

"Not a particle. But I'm thinkin' the hardest kind of lightin' out myself."

"When?"

"Right away. Tonight, maybe. I don't know for certain."

"But you were going to stick to Hart till you got back to his ranch," I reminded him.

"I did fully intend to. I told 'im he could count on me for the round trip, and I don't like to bust open a promise. But that little fracas on the road today makes me skittish. I think lots of my neck. I never could dance on a floor, and I'd ruther not try it on air."

"Do you think—" I began, startled.

"I don't think, I know," Newt interrupted me. "Hart believes he give them blowhards such a scare that they'll never stop runnin'. But I don't believe any such stuff—not a word of it. Out in this part of the country it's the easiest thing in the world to get help to swing up a horse-thief or a cattle-thief. Ain't a settler this side of the Coloraydo that won't bounce up in the middle of a meal or in the middle of the night to attend to a pleasant little matter of that kind. And most of 'em will thank you for the chance. And when they do once get under full swing, they'll make a clean sweep of this layout. We'll all look alike to them—innocent and guilty on the same limb."

This was alarming. I looked at Frank and Frank at me. Neither of us had thought of such a peril before.

"But won't they be more likely to come with the sheriff?" I wanted to know.

"No sheriff for them two fellows," replied Newt. "They're too boilin' mad. If Hart had let 'em off easier, they might have struck for the county seat. But now they'll come back with a rope. And they'll bring men a plenty to pull it too."

"When did you say you expected to go?" It was Frank's question.

"I've not quite decided about that. I'd like to get away the first

good chance; tonight if I can slip out. But not later than tomorrow night or the night after. This trouble won't be apt to hold off more than two or three days. I tried to scare up Hart while we were out today, but he's not easy to scare. Said he was all right and laughed at me. He as good as told me to mind my own business. And that's just what I'll do, I guess. He thinks he's got things fixed so's nobody cain't hurt 'im. But when forty or fifty fellows that have lost cattle get into one gang, and find all their stolen stock in this one drove, they won't take the trouble to open that tin-box and read all them bill of sales. Not much they won't. They'll be too busy, and in too big a hurry."

"Wait a minute, Newt," said Frank, as he motioned to me.

We walked off a few yards, talking together in low tones. Soon we had decided to tell Newt exactly how we came to be here.

So we went back to him; and while the three of us strolled together among the scattering mesquites, we narrated the whole story. He listened in astonished silence.

"And so you boys own an interest in this outfit too, do you?" he exclaimed, as soon as we had concluded. "Well, the chances are you'll have worlds of trouble gettin' your cattle away. Hart's not a safe man to fool with."

"What would he do if we went to him and told him the straight of the matter?" I wanted to know.

"Well, you saw what he did today. First thing, he'd call for your proof. Then, if you didn't trot out some bill of sales, he'd want to know why you'd waited all these weeks to put in your claims. By that time he'd be worked up like a rattler after you've poked him with a stick. And the chances are that he'd punch you with his six-shooter, like he did them chaps today, and order you to make tracks."

"None of that kind of thing for me, if you please," remarked Frank, drawing up his shoulders shiveringly.

"And after you did that, if you went and got an officer to arrest 'im," Newt went on, "there'd be an examin'in' trial before some justice of the peace. You couldn't prove that the cattle belonged to you, I guess; but Hart would bring up his bill of sales, describin' every cow-brute of 'em to a hair. And he could call witnesses, too. If he put me on the stand I'd have to swear straight up and down that I saw 'im buy that spotted bell-steer from another drove. And there was other people that saw it, too—people not connected with any cattle-buyin' outfit. So the upshot of the matter would be that the squire would release Hart and turn the cattle over to him. Of course if you had a lawyer he might fix things so as to hold the cattle till you could bring on your witnesses. But that would take lots of time and trouble, and some expense. So that's all the satisfaction you could figger on for callin' in the sheriff."

"We hadn't thought of calling in the sheriff," I assured him. "We tried that over east of the river, and got more than we wanted of it."

"And we don't want to have to bring our friends all the way out here, either," said Frank. "We're two hundred miles or so from home, and our fathers and neighbors have got too much on their hands to be making long trips across the country to identify a few cattle."

"Then I'd advise you to strike a trot for home and let the cattle alone," Newt answered. "They're not worth the risk you'll have to run to get 'em away."

At the beginning of my trip in pursuit of Lep I might have been tempted to take this advice under the present or similar circumstances. But the obstacles already overcome had hardened my will

and developed my self-reliance. And at least some little tinge of iron had entered into my soul.

"Not a step do I go without that ox," I announced. "I'll track him all the rest of my days, and follow him to the ends of the earth, or I'll drive him home. I'm not going to waste weeks and weeks, and ride over half the State of Texas, and then sneak back to the Little Pecan and tell father and everybody that I found Lep, but couldn't get possession of him. No, sirree! Not while I'm able to wag I won't. When I go home that ox goes with me if he's alive. And if he's dead, his hide and horns must go to prove it. No two ways about that."

Lindsay stood gazing at a near-by hill, already growing dim and shadowy in the thickening dusk. He was weighing the matter.

"Then there's only one gate open that I can think of," he said at length. "You'll have to slip your cattle out of the herd the first chance you get, and run 'em off. But the Lord have mercy on your souls if Hart catches you at it. You can take Hart's money or his clothes, and he won't fret so overly much. With all his meanness he's not a stingy man. But his touchy spot's a cow-brute. Just lay a finger on one cow or calf or yearlin' that belongs to him, and he'll be on top of you like a thousand catamounts."

"We've already made up our minds to take that risk, Newt," I hastened to say. "When do you think we'll have the best show to escape—to get away safely?"

"You ought to go tonight, by all means," he replied. "The sooner you put miles between you and this outfit the safer you'll be. But it might be all right to wait till tomorrow night."

"I've been thinking that possibly we might manage to drop our cattle by the roadside as we drive along tomorrow," suggested I. "Later we could slip away from the drove, and then come back and pick them up."

"We'd have to anchor Lep to something," put in Frank. "If we didn't, we'd never find hair or hide of him. He's too slippery. He's as bad as an eel."

"Yes, we could hide him in the brush somewhere till we could come back for him," I assented. "The other two would stay with him, I've no doubt. Of course we'd have to stuff his bell, or take it off."

"That plan might work out all right but for one thing, boys," said Newt. "And I don't believe you can dodge round that. Hart would be apt to miss that spotted steer as soon as he got back and run his eye over the drove. And if he didn't miss the steer himself, he'd be dead certain to miss that bell, first thing. Then there'd be trouble right quick."

"We could drop out pretty soon after we got our cattle out," suggested Frank. "If Jose was with us he'd keep the cattle moving, I guess. If he couldn't he could round them up and hold them till the other boys and Hart got back."

"No, that wouldn't work at all," Newt decided. "That way you wouldn't get more than an hour's start of Hart, and he'd run onto you before sundown. And then woe to you! What you need is a good, long start, before Hart finds out you're gone. A whole night you ought to have; but half the night might answer. Night-time's better than day-time, too, because nobody will be apt to see you in the dark. If you can once get twenty or thirty miles ahead, you oughtn't to have much trouble givin' 'im the slip. You mustn't let Hart overtake you. He's a dangerous fellow when he gets worked up. No tellin' what he would do. And a dead man or two ain't no great matter out in this wild country."

"When do you think will be the best time to start, Newt?" I inquired.

"Well, you cain't well get matters in shape for tonight; and you'd better set tomorrow night, and have everything fixed by that time, so your whole plan will slide through like it was greased. It won't be any joke if you get tripped up."

We discussed the matter in all its details as we strolled back toward the camp. Newt entered into our plans as heartily as we did. Finally, when in sight of the wagon, he announced:

"Boys, I've been figgerin' on cuttin' loose from this layout sooner or later, and now will be as good a time as I'm likely to run across. If I wait much longer I'm liable to need somebody to cut me loose—from a limb. By goin' when you do maybe I can help you through the hardest places. So we'll all light out together."

L. O. F. C.

CHAPTER XIX.

BETRAYED BY A BELL.

WHEN Newt Lindsay made known his intention to go with us, a burden seemed lifted from Frank's shoulders and mine. Newt was a shrewd, clear-headed fellow, and our plans would be far less likely to come to grief with his help than without it.

As we entered the camp Ame and Ben, I noticed, were talking seriously to Hart. Only a few words I overheard; but from those I easily understood that they were warning him of danger from vigilants. Hart laughed at them and rallied them on their timidity. If he himself felt the slightest fear, he concealed it behind a mask of cheerfulness.

For various reasons I slept but lightly that night. The strange, unenviable situation I found myself in, and the difficult and perhaps dangerous venture ahead of us, seemed to have frightened sleep from me. And besides, what Newt and the other cowboys had said about our peril from a mob had left me in an excitable frame of mind.

Newt was of the opinion that there would be little danger for a day or two, but I was already alarmed. If those two men could gather a crowd at all, it seemed to me that they were as likely to fall upon us tonight as later. The passing of horsemen along the road, which was only a few hundred yards from our camp, was sufficient to set my heart to thumping fast till the hoof-beats had died away. Frank was by nature less excitable than I; but more than once during the night I saw him rise to his elbow to listen, when any suspicious sound was in the air. And Newt was almost as wakeful and restless.

Once or twice only, I think, did I drop into a light slumber during the early hours of the night. And I was rather relieved than otherwise when my time came to turn out and go on guard.

As usual Frank and I were standing guard together. The cattle were all lying comfortably in the grass, and there was little for us to do. Our horses we saddled and bridled for emergencies. But we left them to graze, while we ourselves strolled about on foot, keeping an eye on the prostrate drove.

Now we had a good opportunity to talk over, and over and over, all the details of our proposed escape. Both of us heartily disliked the secret character of what we were about to do. For I believed then, as I know now, that a thing that must be done under cover of darkness is usually far better left undone. But there are exceptions even to that rule. And the very peculiar situation we now found ourselves in, and the character of the man we had to deal with, seemed to make it necessary to do as we had planned to do.

While we were talking over the matter, one conclusion that forced itself upon us surprised us not a little, and very unpleasantly, too.

In our very first conversation with Hart he had mentioned having paid twenty dollars for Lep. While looking over the bills of sale in the tin box I had found written evidence that this was true; and I had also learned that he had spent six dollars for Frank's yearling steer and eight dollars for the two-year-old heifer. This made a total cost to him of thirty-four dollars for our three animals.

While our own title to the cattle was indisputable, and we were

in no sense responsible for what Hart had done, to drive them away as we expected to do, without letting him know anything about it, seemed very much like taking something of value from him for nothing. In other words it was too much like stealing.

We fought against it as long as possible; but gradually the conviction took fast hold of us that, before we could drive off our cattle under cover of night, we must first pay back the thirty-four dollars that Hart had spent for them.

"I don't want to do it at all," grumbled Frank, kicking resentfully at an inoffensive weed. "It hurts like pulling eye-teeth to pay for something you're already the owner of. And it's more than half what they're worth, too. Still, we can't afford to do anything that seems even half-way akin to stealing; so it looks like we're bound to fork over our hard-earned cash."

"Yes, our hard-earned cash," I repeated, regretfully, half sadly. "I'd hoped to get home with at least a few dollars in my pocket, to pay for all the time I've lost from work. But this will about clean me up. I shall have to go back with my pockets as empty as they were the day I started."

"Pretty hard luck," admitted Frank. But there was no escape from it.

Fortunately we had spent very little, either on the road or in San Antonio; and the money we had earned by grubbing, added to what Hart had already paid us and what he still owed us, would make the required amount and a few dollars over. Perhaps, by close economy, we might have enough left to get home on.

Next morning when we confided to Newt that we proposed to repay Hart, he laughed at us at first, then tried to argue us out of it. But, finding that we had fully made up our minds, he dismissed the subject by saying:

"Well, if you've got more cash than you want to pack around with you, I s'pose that's as good a way to lighten your loads as any."

"We're not paying it to lighten our loads; its to lighten our consciences," I assured him.

While in camp at noon Frank and I wrote a letter to Hart, setting forth all the facts in the case, and explaining why we were leaving him secretly. We assured him that we had fully intended to tell him all this by word of mouth instead of writing it; but that after seeing how he treated people who laid claim to cattle in his drove we preferred to get ours out in some less unpleasant way.

This letter we enclosed in an envelope addressed to Hart; and with it we enclosed all the money due him for the three cattle after deducting what he still owed us. The letter we proposed to leave in the tin-box, on top of all the other papers, where the ranchman could not fail to find it.

Some time during the afternoon drive we came to a well-beaten road which, we were told, was the Fort Concho trail. Now we set our faces toward the fort. The cattle-buying circuit, which had covered not less than two hundred and fifty miles, and occupied between two and three weeks, had at last come to an end.

The country passed over during the day had been more or less broken, and as night came on we found ourselves among some brush-covered hills. Just at the time to camp, our road was running between a brushy hill on our north side and a pretty creek, the banks of the creek overgrown with tall timber.

On coming to a place where the stream was passable, we crossed the cattle over. Then, driving down a narrow prairie valley, we went into camp between the timber of the stream and the foot of another steep, brush-covered hill on the south.

We three conspirators, knowing what we had to do that night, were relieved to see that camp itself—the place where the wagon would stand and the camp-fire be kindled—was among the scattering bushes and thickets. We were also well pleased to note that the cattle had been stopped above the camp, nearer the point where we had forded the creek.

After supper, which was eaten at dusk, our party sat together on the grass near the wagon, some of the men smoking pipes, and the two Mexicans rolling and smoking corn-shuck cigarettes. There was but little conversation. Hart, with all his faults, never touched tobacco. And he often had sarcastic things to say of those who did. He was usually cheerful and rather talkative. But tonight he sat in moody silence. Evidently there was something serious on his mind.

I was afraid he would ask Frank or me what we were going to do, now that the outfit was moving toward his ranch again. But he did not. He had already told us that we could go on with him if we chose. And perhaps he was taking it for granted that we would go. Under different circumstances we should have been glad to make the trip.

When bed-time came, which was never long after dark, Frank, remarking that he would like a place where the grass was thicker, went off a few yards from the others and there made his bed. I followed him; for we always slept together. Before spreading down our blankets we went to the wagon for our slickers to put under them. While there I deposited our letter to Hart in the tin-box; and Frank slipped out his saddle-bags. So far as our few belongings were concerned we were now ready for our venture.

Before lying down Hart, as his custom was, had assigned each of us his time for going on guard. We divided the night into four watches, and two men were always on duty together. But the same men seldom had the same watch two nights running.

For tonight Ame Watson and Ben Dankens would take the first watch, ending about ten o'clock. Newt Lindsay and Jose, one of the Mexicans, would have the second, ending about midnight. Frank and I would follow, from midnight till half past two. Then Hart and the other Mexican would go on duty till daylight.

That was the night's program as announced by Hart. In some respects it was very satisfactory to us; in other respects very unsatisfactory. As we dared not try to slip our cattle out of the herd except when Frank and I were on guard, we should have preferred to take the first watch ourselves, that we might steal away earlier in the night. But as we had never before objected to Hart's assignments, we were afraid to object now, lest we excite suspicion.

However, there were advantages in the present arrangement. If we were to get away earlier in the night, the very failure to change the guards would be likely to arouse our wakeful employer, and our escape would soon be known. But as our watch would not end till after two o'clock, we were hopeful that Hart and everybody else might sleep on peacefully till morning, thus giving us a start of four or five hours. In that time we expected to get miles away—so many miles that Hart would never be able to find us. That is, if he made any determined attempt, as Newt was positive he would.

For fear of a stampede or other trouble, those of us on guard always kept our horses saddled while we were up. Sometimes we mounted and rode slowly round and round the cattle. But as no one wanted his horse to stand under the saddle all night long, saddles were frequently brought in and taken out. This custom would enable us to saddle our horses, when the time came, without arousing suspicion.

Before going to bed I walked down to where my pony was lariated, to see that he had not wound up his rope. And I also took a stroll around the cattle. Not a single member of the drove of six hundred and more was on foot. There was a few-days-old moon, and by its light I could easily distinguish Lep, lying out toward the center of the dim drove. Frank's two animals, I was careful to notice, lay not far from Lep. Their attachment to the big fellow, which had already led them many a long, weary mile from home, was still unbroken.

Immediately after supper we three conspirators had sauntered away from the camp and reviewed our plans from first to last. There seemed no chance for a failure. And yet I was anxious and nervous, and lay so long thinking over our prospective flight that I half believed I should not fall asleep. But at last I did; though it seemed only a few minutes till Newt was shaking me and saying, quietly:

"Your time to turn out now."

Quickly I sat up, very wide awake. Frank was already pulling on his boots. Soon we were ready. Taking up our saddles and blankets and the few other things, we started for our horses. Vic, always ready to go, was off ahead of us.

Even before we left the camp Jose, the Mexican that had been on guard with Newt, had come in and rolled himself in his blankets.

But Newt had gone back to his horse; and while we were girting on our saddles he joined us.

The moon had set long ago. And even without the screening bushes around the wagon, there was not light enough for our movements to be seen from the camp.

When Dick had been saddled, and my blanket and slicker tied on behind the saddle, I took off my lariat, and handed my bridle-rein to Newt. Frank also gave his horse into Newt's care. Then Frank and I advanced cautiously into the herd, toward the spot where Lep's figure could now be dimly made out. I was whistling softly, and Frank was humming a tune, to keep from frightening the animals as we picked our way among them.

We reached Lep safely. After speaking to him, and rubbing his back a few strokes, I dropped down by his head and stuffed his big bell as full of grass as I could cram it. Then I knotted the lariat around his head, just under his horns. He would lead like a horse.

Now I punched him up. He rose with a great sigh at being disturbed, which sounded loud to me. However, there were sighing and puffing all around us, as the grass-distended animals lay at ease in the grass, hundreds of jaws grinding away busily on hundreds of cuds, like so many grass-mills.

Slowly, cautiously I led Lep out, picking an open way among the recumbent animals. Frank came close behind, driving his yearling and his two-year-old. I was somewhat afraid of frightening the herd, but they were farm-animals rather than range-stock, and not easy to stampede. And besides they had been driven a good many miles since morning and were pretty tired.

At length we were safely clear of the herd, and were moving up the valley. Newt came close behind Frank, leading our three horses. We followed along the edge of the timber that fringed the stream till we arrived at the crossing-place. The water here was rippling over a rocky shoal, filling the still night with its soft murmurings. But the trampling of our cattle on the rocks sounded frightfully loud in my ears as we crossed. However, we were a few hundred yards above the camp now, and the danger of discovery was not great.

But there would soon be far more danger. The road we must follow led down the creek; and while the timbered banks would hide us

completely, we must pass within thirty or forty yards of the camp. The hill on the north would hem us in, being both too brushy and too steep for our cattle and horses to climb.

As we came opposite to where the camp was known to be I advanced slowly and cautiously. But in spite of that, how heavily our half-dozen animals seemed to tread! Hart was a light sleeper, as I well knew. Little could go on in the vicinity of the camp that he was not aware of. I listened intently, anxiously for any sound over there, but none came. My hope was that if he did hear us passing, he would mistake us for either loose animals or travelers.

Then, just as it appeared that we were to get safely away, something happened that I had not for a moment foreseen.

Even now I have no doubt that I had stuffed, crammed, wedged, driven the grass into that bell so tightly that it could not have come out of itself. But in my zeal to do a thorough job, I must have filled the bell too full—so full that some of the grass stuck out below. Frank afterwards informed me that he thought he had seen his red yearling, which was walking by Lep's side, reach his nose under as if smelling the bell. Doubtless the young steer was nibbling at the grass.

However the disaster came about, there suddenly pealed forth on the motionless night-air the deep tones of that big bell! Indeed, so frightfully loud did it boom out in my ears, that it could scarcely have crashed through the stillness more violently if it had weighed a ton and hung in a belfry.

CHAPTER XX.

"UP WITH YOUR HANDS THERE!"

SCARCELY had Lep's bell begun to sound forth its treacherous peals, betraying our escape, when I, after recovering from my first consternation, wheeled and made a grab at it. So suddenly and savagely did I lunge toward him that Lep, thinking himself the victim of a violent assault, sprang back and tried to run away, thereby making the bell ring more loudly.

But I still held the rope, and in spite of his struggles I had quickly gripped the bell and choked off its frightful voice. Not, however, till the whole valley had been set a-ringing.

"Do stop that awful thing!" Newt said, half in a whisper, half aloud.

"I've got it stopped," I told him. I had hold of the bell-clapper, and in my excited wrath was trying to tear it out of the bell—a noisy, blabbing tongue out of a traitorous mouth.

But it was too strong for me. Then I jerked a handkerchief from my neck, double-knotted it around the big-ended clapper, and tied it hard and fast to the collar above. The bell was now fastened mouth up.

All this was done hastily. But before it was finished we heard voices in the camp, which told us that our escape, or at least the escape of some cattle, had been discovered. Presently Hart commenced calling—calling first Frank and then me. Of course we did not answer. Later he shouted for Newt, loudly and angrily, till the whole valley rang and echoed. By this time he was in a rage, and oaths were beginning to fly. Then he ordered the other hands to get out and saddle their horses as quickly as possible.

We had fully expected to obtain a start of four or five hours before our escape became known. But now it was discovered, and we were not yet a stone's throw from the camp. A serious situation for us, surely.

Already we were moving on. We could hear Hart talking—talking at the top of his voice. And he was certainly in a fury. We could scarcely blame him for being angry; but we were not quite prepared for one of his threats.

"We'll follow the sneakin' scoundrels," he fairly shouted, "and where we overtake 'em, there we leave 'em!" And then he poured forth such a torrent of abuse and profanity as I had never heard flow from his lips.

Newt now called a halt. "They'll soon be after us, boys," he said, "and we've got to ride and ride fast. Let's drop the cattle right here."

But my determination not to return home without Lep had been growing too long and taken too deep root to be pulled up so easily.

"Look here, Newt," I said, "we've been on the track of these cattle too many weeks to run off and leave them the first minute we get them into our own hands. Dark as the night is now, we can escape with them about as well as without them."

"That's right," endorsed Frank. "We don't have to risk everything on speed. If the worst comes, we can drive into the brush and dodge and hide. This country was made on purpose for that."

Seeing that our heads were set, Newt gave in to us, though very reluctantly. After a few words together, we agreed upon a plan of action. I now sprang into my saddle, still holding the rope that was around Lep's horns. The others mounted also, and away we went, I leading and they driving. Lep held back lazily at first, but Frank and Newt played their whips over him, and he was quickly at my pony's heels. Lep could run like a race-horse when he got in full swing.

We could still hear voices in the camp; and doubtless the clatter we ourselves made was plainly audible there. But on we fled through the star-lit night, up and down hills, across gullies and ravines, and over stretches of rocky road, all at the same reckless, headlong speed.

For a few days, with this or a similar emergency in our mind's eye, we had been riding Hart's horses all the time, and our own horses were now rested. They ran well; but after two or three miles our cattle, and particularly the young ones, began to breathe noisily. I drew Dick down from a run to a gallop, and then to a trot, and later to a walk. Finally we all halted, to listen.

At first we could hear nothing to alarm us. But soon hoof-beats, faint and far away, but fast growing louder, reached our ears. Undoubtedly Hart and some of his cowboys were coming, in furious, vengeful pursuit.

"They're hot on our trail, boys, and it's high time for us to be sliding out of their way," remarked Frank.

"That's right, but we'd better not try any more runnin' just now," Newt answered. "Let's take to the brush and give 'em a clear course."

"Yes, and let's be quick about it," I spoke up. "We want to get well out of the way and well hid before they come too close. And that won't be long."

We had now left those steep hills behind; but the country we were in was still pretty well covered with brush—mesquite bushes and low, squatty mesquite trees here. In appearance such a country as that always reminds me of a peach orchard—a peach orchard set without rows. One can easily ride in any direction; but even in broad daylight it is impossible to see many yards through it.

We now turned out of the road, and quickly lost ourselves among the mesquites. After winding a few hundred yards we stopped. The furiously galloping horsemen were already drawing near. We all dismounted. Vic, panting a little from our recent race, now came to me. I had not caught so much as a glimpse of her since we first started, but I had had no fears of losing her.

She was far from being a noisy dog; but there was a possibility that she would bark, at least a few times, as the horsemen dashed by. So I sat down and held her, with my hand around her mouth.

While the horsemen were coming on my heart kept beating responsively to the hoof-beats—louder and faster, louder and faster. In fact, I half expected that our pursuers, on reaching the point where we had left the road, would turn out likewise and come tearing through the brush after us. But they clattered on, and kept clattering on till they had passed beyond hearing. Then, and not till then, did I breathe freely again.

"Well, we're shut of that trouble for a while, I guess. So we might as well be on the go," remarked Newt.

Now we wound our way back to the road. I was still leading Lep, and Frank and Newt were driving him and the other cattle.

"Do you suppose those fellows are likely to come back?" said I while we were jogging along at an easy gait.

"Not yet a while, I guess. But we'll have to look sharp later," answered Newt.

We did not travel fast; for there was no knowing what minute we might hear our pursuers—our would-be pursuers—returning, and have to drive off into the brush again. The country was wilderness here—a wilderness of brush and low hills.

For several miles we kept on, meeting nobody and hearing nobody and seeing nobody. We were constantly on our guard, and more or less anxious all the time. But day dawned at last, and still our enemies had not troubled us.

While the dawn was yet gray, we came to where our road split itself wide open. One fork, leading almost south, was the road along which we had traveled with the drove of cattle the day before. The main fork kept on due east.

Up to this time we had been unable to make anything of the trail of Hart's party, because of the darkness and of the trampled condition of the road. But now we could see that two horses had recently galloped east on the road leading in that direction. We had little doubt as to who their riders were.

"But there were three or four in that gang," said Frank. "They must have split up here. Let me see if I can pick out the other trail."

He moved along the south road for fifteen yards, crossing back and forth, and presently announced that he had discovered the tracks of two more horses.

"So there must be four of 'em huntin' us down," said Newt. "Hart and Ame and Ben and one of them Greasers—Jose I guess. The other Greaser and Sam Hart left at the camp to stand guard over the cattle. Now the question is: which road ought we to travel?"

"East for us," I told him. "We want to get back beyond the Colorado as soon as possible."

So we followed the main-traveled road. All the time we kept our eyes and ears strained. A meeting with Hart or any of his cowboys was the last thing we desired just now. But we jogged along four or five miles farther without seeing a soul. Then our road forked again, the less-traveled branch leading north. As their trail indicated, the two horsemen had ridden straight on.

"Well, which road now, boys?" remarked Newt. "Still east?"

"Yes, straight ahead, I guess," Frank answered.

But something had occurred to me. "If we keep on this way, we're liable any minute to find ourselves face to face with those fellows. They're bound to come back sooner or later. Why not ride north till we get clear of them? Then we can turn east again. We live miles and miles north of here anyway."

After some discussion the others accepted my view that it would be wiser to follow the less-traveled road, and away we went, our faces turned northward.

A few miles in that direction brought us to a settler's cabin, the first we had seen today; and after that we passed other scattering settlements. We crossed an occasional open prairie; but most of the country bristled with mesquite brush and different kinds of scrubby timber.

Our winding, snake-like road, which had been dim and little traveled when we first turned north, kept growing plainer as it swallowed up other winding, snake-like roads from time to time. The settlements kept getting closer and closer together; and we were not greatly surprised when, at length, we looked from a low hill upon a little town. A few minutes later we entered it.

The town stood in some woods—some scattering, scragly woods. There was a square of one-story wooden store-houses, and most of them small and unpainted and weather-beaten, set around a plain but neat-looking stone court-house, two stories high.

The time was now noon. Half the night and half the day we had been in the saddle, almost without stopping. Not having swallowed a bite since supper of the day before, our appetites were little short of ravenous. And we knew our horses and cattle must be still hungrier. There was a livery-stable at one side of the square, and at Newt's suggestion we turned in there and dismounted.

After unsaddling, we drew water from a well in a yard or pen back of the stable, and watered all our animals. Then we bought feed for them. The horses we fed in stalls in the stable, but the cattle were fed in the pen behind the stable, in the shade of a big elm. All the animals showed signs of their hard traveling.

Later we ourselves drank out of the bucket, and washed our hands and faces in the watering-trough.

"Well, I don't know how you boys feel, but I, for one, am glad that little business is over, and that we're safely out of it," I remarked, while we were taking turns at our hair with our one pocket-comb.

"Do you suppose there's any danger here?" asked Frank.

"Of course not," I answered, confidently. "Even if they did find us here, they wouldn't dare bother us."

"No, I don't think they would," Newt agreed.

Now we started out in search of dinner. There was no restaurant, but at one of the stores we made a hearty meal of canned stuff. Afterwards we returned to the livery-stable. There were many people in town, we had noticed; and the livery-stable keeper informed us that district court was in session. But we had little interest in such matters.

"Boys," said Newt, "I'm about to fall asleep on my feet. I didn't sleep much night before last, and I scarcely shut an eye last night. The horses and cattle need rest anyway, and I'd like to have a good, long snooze before we go any farther. Let's ask this man to let us climb up into his loft and nap it a while on the hay, or whatever he's got up there."

"I'm in for that," declared Frank. And I agreed with him.

The proprietor was willing enough, and we climbed the ladder into the loft. It was rather dark up there under the roof, and a good place to sleep on that account. The hay and sheaf-oats were luxury itself after a blanket on the ground, and each of us had soon picked out a comfortable place and gone to sleep in it.

We slept like logs, to use one of our own expressions, for perhaps two hours. And so weary were we that we might have slept away most of the afternoon if we had been left undisturbed. But I was finally aroused by a voice almost in my ear:

"Wake up! Wake up here! Will you never wake?"

Drowsily, still half asleep, I sat up. I was scarcely a yard from the top of the ladder, my two companions being farther back. Looking from under heavy lids, in the dim loft, I could make out a man standing on the ladder, with his head and shoulders above the loft. And then suddenly, I was wide awake; for there was a six-shooter in the man's hand. While not cocked or aimed, it was pointing unmistakably at me!

My first impression was that Hart had overtaken us and come for vengeance. But another look showed me that the man was an utter stranger.

"Up with your hands there, please!" he ordered sternly, but quietly.

I was only a foot or two from the gaping muzzle of that six-shooter; and when I failed to raise my hands, it came up to a level with my face.

"What—who—who are you?" I stammered. But my hands remained obstinately down.

"I'm the sheriff of this county; and I hold a warrant for your arrest."

"Arrest! What for?" I demanded, in amazement.

"For stealing these three cattle down here in the pen," was the quiet reply.

CHAPTER XXI.

PRISONERS AT THE BAR.

UP with your hands, I say!" repeated the sheriff, still more sternly. And he thrust that big-mouthed six-shooter closer to my nose.

"What do you want my hands up for?" I growled, resentfully. "Nothing in them. And there's not a sign of a weapon on me. Are you afraid I'll scratch you?" I held out my open hands, but I did not hold them up.

"All right, then," he answered, rather good-naturedly. "But slide over this way a little, till I can make sure."

I moved nearer. After feeling of my pockets, my boot-legs and the front of my shirt, he stepped up into the loft and motioned me toward the ladder.

"Climb down, please," he ordered, but without looking at me. He had turned his attention to Frank and Newt, who were still sleeping, unconscious of impending trouble.

I now started down the ladder, and quickly discovered five deputy sheriffs guarding the bottom of it, every one with a six-shooter in his hand. Scarcely had I set foot on the floor, when one of the guards approached and searched me again, from head to foot this time. He even robbed me of my pocket-knife.

Frank came climbing down the ladder, closely followed by Newt. The deputies now began to search my two friends very thoroughly, as they had searched me. Frank's six-shooter was in his saddle-bags, and Newt's had been unbelted before he lay down and thrown back on the hay, where the sheriff failed to discover it. So, when the search was ended, no weapon had been found on any of us.

"Why didn't you bring a hundred men and a cannon or two to arrest three unarmed boys?" I inquired, sarcastically, of the armed circle surrounding us. "A brave crowd you are!" I added, bitterly; for I felt that we had already been disgraced.

The sheriff and his deputies appeared somewhat abashed, and every six-shooter promptly hid itself in its scabbard.

"It was only a matter of precaution, boys," the sheriff apologized, very nicely. "Of course we didn't know anything about you, and we didn't know you were unarmed. There are so many reckless, desperate characters riding about the country these days it's safer for us and better for them that we don't give them any chance to resist when we go to arrest them."

Fifteen or twenty men now flocked into the livery-stable attracted hither by curiosity. They had seen the half-dozen officers marching over here from the court-house, and had been told that some cattle-thieves were to be arrested. But they had prudently remained outside till it was all over, half expecting a battle. It was rather fashionable at this time for law-breakers to resist officers of the law.

"Who is it accuses us of stealing those cattle?" demanded Frank.

"The men that swore to the warrant are over in my office at the court-house," answered the sheriff.

"We want to face them," I spoke up.

"You shall face them, and that very soon," answered the officer,

but not unkindly. He saw how we had taken the arrest to heart, and he doubtless felt sorry for us.

"What's their names?" asked Newt.

The sheriff took out a paper. "This is the warrant," he said. "I'll read it to you." And read it he did, with all its quaint legal phraseology and repetitions. The names of the men who had sworn to the truth of the charge specified in it were Amos Watson and Benjamin Dankens.

As we afterwards learned Ame and Ben had finally struck our trail, followed us to the town, and had found the three cattle. The keeper of the livery-stable had refused to surrender the animals and had advised the cowboys to talk with the sheriff. That officer had declined to do anything until they had sworn out a warrant. That done, our arrest had followed promptly.

All three of us stood half-stupefied by the astonishing turn affairs had taken. Not once had it occurred to us that Hart or his cowboys would dare do such a thing as drag us into court. But now that they had done so, I for one was beginning to realize what an embarrassing and troublesome predicament we had got ourselves into. If we had claimed the cattle before driving them off, or if we had had any proof whatever of Hart's guilt in handling stolen stock, all would have been easy enough. But, as matters now stood, our accusers held every advantage.

There was one all-important point in our favor, however; and to that solid rock of fact I clung with hopeful tenacity.

"Mr. Sheriff," I said, "is it a crime to drive off your own cattle, no matter where you find them?"

"Of course not. A man can do what he pleases with his own."

"Then we're all right," I declared. "That's just what we did, and nothing more."

"Can you prove that those three cattle out there are your property?" the officer inquired.

"We certainly can."

"Yes, we certainly can," spoke up Frank. "It may take time to get our witnesses here, but we can prove beyond a doubt that those cattle belong to us."

"Then you're all right, boys," the sheriff assured us. "And I hope you can. But the men over there have told a pretty straight tale, and topped it off with an affidavit. As you heard in the warrant, they swear that their employer, a man named Hart, is the owner of these cattle. They swear, too, that you boys were hired hands of Hart's; and that last night, in the dead of night, while you were supposed to be standing guard over the drove, you stole out these animals and ran them off."

"That's the naked truth, except that Hart didn't really own the cattle," said Frank. "Do they charge us with stealing our horses?"

"No. They say you're riding your own horses. They made one false impression on me, though. From what they told me I inferred that you must be pretty reckless fellows, if you were young. That's why we came in force. But I've already changed my mind about that. For one thing, you three sleep too soundly to have much on your consciences. And the fact that you're going about the country unarmed is good evidence that you're not the desperate characters I mistook you to be. But I don't understand how you could have done all that these men swear you did, and still be innocent."

"We're innocent of any wrong-doing, just the same. But we're not quite unarmed. I've got a six-shooter yonder in my saddle-bags," replied Frank.

"And my six-shooter is up-stairs on the hay," Newt explained. "I laid it aside before I went to sleep."

Deputies started to get the weapons. While they were gone, something occurred to me with startling suddenness, and I demanded of the sheriff:

"You're not going to put us in jail?"

"Can you give bond?"

"I—I'm afraid not. We're strangers here. I must be a hundred and fifty or two hundred miles from home."

"Then I don't see how I can do otherwise. The law requires it."

I turned away. To me, naturally sensitive as I was, the very thought of being locked up with criminals was dreadful. All the rest of my life I should be pointed out as the boy or man who had once been in jail. Even my conscious innocence could not console me for that.

"It will be an outrage if you do!" declared Frank, bitterly. The sheriff returned no answer.

Now we crossed over from the livery-stable to the court-house. Everybody that noticed us stopped and stared, but I was only vaguely aware of it. The sheriff's office was on the first floor; and there we found Ame Watson and Ben Dankins. Our recent fellow-cowboys only glared at us. When informed by the sheriff that we claimed to own the cattle found in our possession, they disputed our statement flatly and angrily.

"We saw Hart buy 'em—saw 'im with our own eyes," declared Ame.

"Of course you saw him buy them," Frank answered. "But he bought them from thieves. We were trailing those cattle when we overtook you and hired to Hart."

"You worked with our outfit three weeks. Did you lay claim to any one of them three cattle once in all that time?" demanded Ame.

"No, we never did," Frank admitted. "That may have been our mistake, but—"

Ame laughed sneeringly.

"But after seeing how men fared that did lay claim to cattle in that drove, we didn't care to try it ourselves," I spoke up.

Ame scowled, but he did not sneer any more.

"Boys," said the sheriff, "I'll tell you just what I'd do if I were in your place. District court is in session up-stairs now, and I would ask for an examining trial. The case is a rather deep one for me; and I have no authority to release you anyway, except on bond. But as you claim to be entirely innocent in fact of the charge brought against you I'll speak to the judge about your case, and see if I can't get him to call you before him right away. He's a very careful, cautious man, Judge Wheeler is, and he'll do you justice. You can depend on that."

After consulting together we three prisoners decided to ask for an examining trial as soon as possible; and we so informed the sheriff. Leaving us guarded by three deputies the officer went upstairs to the court-room. A quarter of an hour later he came down again and said:

"I've just been talking to the judge about you, and he says he'll hear you before he takes up any other case. He's waiting now. If you're ready we'll go up at once."

And up-stairs to the court-room we marched, the sheriff himself leading the way, and a deputy walking by each of us.

The large court-room was filled with people, and as we followed the sheriff down the aisle, with hundreds of eyes focused upon us, I was in a dazed state. Indeed, it all seemed like a horrible dream to me, from which I half hoped soon to awake and find myself somewhere else—anywhere else but here.

The three of us were marched up to a railing, behind which the

clerk of the court sat at a table, writing busily. Then the officers stepped back, leaving us prisoners alone.

How Newt and Frank stood the ordeal I do not know. But I had to grip the railing hard to steady myself. The judge, a grave but kindly-looking man, sat behind an elevated desk, gazing down upon us through spectacles. There was silence for a few moments, broken, for me, by the tumultuous pounding of my heart.

Presently the judge said something to the clerk, who at once stood up and read a paper to us. Not one word of it did I seem to hear, though its import got into my mind somehow. It was the charge we had heard before from the sheriff. The clerk now sat down, and the judge leaned forward toward us.

"Prisoners at the bar," he said, "you have heard the reading of the charge against you. Do you plead guilty or not guilty?"

After a few moments of the tensest silence, Frank spoke out, very distinctly:

"Not guilty, your honor."

Newt said something in a low tone, doubtless the same. I was thinking rapidly. Knowing little of the ways of courts, I did not understand that this was merely a formal question. And I had no intention of denying the truth. Before I could decide what to answer, the judge turned his legal glasses full upon me and inquired, in his smooth, strong voice:

"And how do you plead, young man?" The tones were very kindly, and I could not help feeling that we were in friendly hands.

But I was still sorely perplexed as to how to answer truthfully. So, instead of answering the question, I blurted out another one—the same that I had asked the sheriff:

"Is it a crime to drive off your own cattle?"

"No," answered the court. "Your method of getting possession of them might not have been the best; but if those cattle are yours no criminal charge can lie against you."

"Then I plead not guilty," answered I, triumphantly. "We drove off those three cattle, just as they say we did. But they belong to us—to our fathers. The yearling and the two-year-old belong to my friend here. The big spotted ox is mine."

"So I am to understand that you base your defense upon the claim that the cattle are yours?" observed the court, with an interrogative inflection.

"That's right," spoke up Frank. "That's our defense—our only defense."

"And if you can establish your ownership of the cattle that will be an entirely sufficient defense," the court assured us. "But, of course, that's the question we shall have to determine. Have you a lawyer to look after your side of the case? If not, and you're unable to employ one, the court will appoint—I will appoint somebody to represent you."

After some whispered consultation among the three of us, Frank announced:

"We have no lawyer, and we hardly think we need one. Just now we have no witnesses besides ourselves, and all we can do is to state our case to you, and let you decide whether we tell the truth or not."

The judge considered the matter a few moments. "Are you all satisfied with that?" he inquired.

"That suits me well enough," answered Newt. I only nodded.

"Very well, then. We'll proceed—but you will have to be cross-examined by the prosecuting attorney. You understand that, don't you?"

"We've nothing but the truth to tell," said Frank.

"Very well. Take your seats back there."

We turned, and the sheriff indicated three chairs for us to occupy. Scarcely had we seated ourselves, when I felt something soft and warm in my hand, which was hanging at my side. Vic was licking it. I had utterly forgotten the little dog, but she had slipped in under the seats and made her way to me. She seemed to realize that I was in serious trouble; and she had come to cheer me up.

I patted her on the head till she put her fore feet up on my lap and looked up into my face encouragingly, as if wanting to say:

"Whatever happens, you've got one friend that will stand by you."

Later she dropped down and sat on the floor between Frank and me, as if she, too, were on trial. Her sharp ears were pricked up alertly, and her bright eyes were fixed on the judge. In fact, she could scarcely have eyed him more intently if he had been a rat or a squirrel. She seemed to realize that on him hung the decision of a momentous question.

Her head was perked knowingly to one side, and so steadfastly did she watch the court that the lawyers seated near called one another's attention to her and smiled. A deputy-sheriff approached, apparently in doubt as to whether he should take her out or not. But the judge shook his head, and the officer retired.

By this time I had largely thrown off my embarrassment, and the importance of impressing the court with the truth of our story had put me on the alert; so much so that I forgot almost everything else—forgot even to worry about what would follow if the court should decide against us.

The prosecuting attorney, a dark, smooth-shaven man, of rather stern countenance, now took hold of the case. After a few remarks to the court, he put Ame Watson on the witness-stand.

The witness told how Newt Lindsay had hired himself to Hart about a year before, and Frank and I nearly three weeks before. He stated that he himself had seen Hart buy the three animals we had afterwards driven off; and he swore that Hart would never have an animal in his herd without a bill of sale to prove his ownership.

Then he gave the particulars of our flight with the cattle, and of the ringing of the bell that had made known our escape to the men in Hart's camp. He also told of pursuing us in the dark and failing to find us; then of retracing their way till they discovered our trail, and of following us here. He told only the truth; but throughout the telling of it he manifested the bitterest animosity toward all of us.

The judge now asked him a few questions, the prosecuting attorney a few more, and we were given permission to question him. But there was nothing we cared to ask.

Ben Dankins was next put on the stand, mainly to corroborate what Ame had already testified to.

"Now one of you may take the chair," said the court, speaking to us. "It doesn't matter who testifies first."

We three prisoners consulted. "Your story commences first, and you'd better tell it first," whispered Frank to me. And Newt agreed with him. So I stepped forward, and after being sworn by the clerk took my seat in the chair for witnesses.

"Now," said the judge, gazing at me through his glasses, "you may state your own case in your own way. Try to bring out everything that has any bearing on this matter. But first give your name and place of residence."

Turning so as to partly face the judge and partly the people in the court-room, I began my story. My voice trembled a little at first, but I soon got control of it.

After stating who I was and where I lived, and that I was probably two hundred miles from home, I mentioned father's settling on

the Little Pecan Creek, and told of whom he had bought Lep and Coaly, and how much he had paid for them. I also mentioned the fact that I had plowed with the oxen for months, and so could not be mistaken as to their identity. Then I told how Lep had run away, and I had followed him—had been following him ever since. I also explained how Frank came to join me, and how it happened that we were hunting three cattle instead of one.

I alluded to the wall of water that had stopped us, and mentioned our being water-bound on the Cowhouse, and our rafting ourselves over. From that I jumped to the finding of our cattle in a drove, and told of the threatening six-shooters that had gaped at us when we tried to claim our own. Almost from the moment I began there had been utter silence in the court-room. But now a murmurous wave of indignation ran over the crowd.

Proceeding, I described our experience with Sheriff Dugan, dwelling particularly on his slowness and on his turning against us and threatening to arrest us after failing to find our cattle in the drove where they had been. Of this matter I made as much as I could; for this alone would explain much of our subsequent course. And I was gratified to notice that what I said produced an unmistakable effect. Another surprised, resentful murmur ran over the crowd. And even the judge himself looked indignant.

"Yes, I can understand how you felt," he said, when I had told of our decision to have nothing more to do with sheriffs. "Such things as that have a natural tendency to bring officers of the law, and even the law itself, into disrepute. I'm glad to inform you that there are very few such sheriffs as that in the state of Texas. And certainly you wouldn't have had any such trouble if you had appealed to Sheriff Renfro, of this county. But go ahead."

Now I went on to tell of our hunt for the lost trail, and later of finding the three cattle in the hands of the man who had bought them from the thieves. Then I dwelt as well as I could on our uncertainty as to the proper course to pursue, and explained that we had jumped at Hart's offer because it allowed us to stay with our cattle till we could come to some decision. I also told of our tardy resolve to explain matters to Hart, and of our changing our minds a few hours later when we saw what happened to the two men who did claim some of Hart's cattle.

Then I explained what the consequences would have been if we had claimed our cattle and been ordered out of the camp for our trouble. Even if we could have persuaded ourselves to call upon another sheriff for help the drove was now at the outer edge of the settlements, and was moving toward Hart's ranch, far out in the wilderness. Before it could be overtaken it would be so far away that no sheriff would probably care to follow. So, at the best, we should have lost our cattle. And so, much as we had disliked the secret nature of what we were doing, we had thought it safest to slip the cattle out and run them off.

When I had finished, the judge leaned back thoughtfully. Every eye in the court-room, mine with the others, was now centered upon him.

CHAPTER XXII.

HELD FOR THE GRAND JURY.

THAT'S a rather remarkable story," the court finally observed. "Have you brought out everything that has any bearing on your case?"

"Everything I think of," I answered. "But there's one point I'd like to mention. There were over six hundred head of cattle in that drove, and thirty or forty horses not far away. If we'd wanted anybody's stock besides our own, we could have driven off fifty or a hundred head just as easily as three."

"That's a good point—a good point in your favor," commented the court. "I'm glad you mentioned it; though it would have occurred to me I've no doubt."

Now the prosecuting attorney took me in hand. If the judge had seemed a friend to us rather than a prosecutor, this man seemed a bitter enemy, not only determined to convict me of cattle-stealing, but taking it for granted in advance that I was a thorough scoundrel. He glared at me as a tiger might glare at an offending pup, and seemed about to pounce upon me and tear me to pieces. Then he plunged into his questions.

His blustering, threatening ways frightened me somewhat at first; but soon the injustice of it occurred to me, and my temper, never the best, came to my relief. After that I felt more angry than afraid, though I was careful enough to conceal my feelings.

"Where did you say you lived?" he shouted. And when I had told him, he shouted again: "Are you sure you don't live in Arkansas or the Indian Territory?"

I only repeated my first answer, and stuck stubbornly to that.

This was a specimen of his questioning. And so he kept on through my whole story.

"Mr. Rhodes," the judge remarked, soon after the cross-examination had begun, "it seems to me that you're unnecessarily belligerent toward this witness. Couldn't you be a little less fierce?"

The attorney glared at the court, but subdued his tones for a few questions. Soon he was going at the same pace again. Twice or three times more the judge reproved him, too mildly it seemed to me. Finally, as if in despair of controlling the blusterer, he remarked to me, dryly:

"You needn't mind Mr. Rhodes, young man. His bark's worse than his bite."

A titter ran through the crowded court room, and the lawyer glared around him. But the manner of his questioning was not much improved. When he came to examine me concerning our leaving Hart's camp, he said:

"Your employer trusted you to guard his cattle, and yet the first thing you did last night was to sneak off and leave that whole drove to scatter all over creation. Call that being honest, do you?" he sneered.

"It wasn't half as bad as you make it out," I answered, stung by his taunts. "We kept a guard around them as a matter of precaution; but they're farm-cattle and not range-cattle, and there wasn't

much danger of a stampede. The guard seldom had anything to do but keep awake. They'd been driven hard, too, those cattle, and they'd had plenty of grass and water. I doubt if a single one of them got up before morning."

"You do, eh?" scoffed the prosecutor. Then he referred to his notes and went on: "When you schemed, plotted to drive off those cattle—the three cattle you claim to own—didn't you know that your employer, Mr. Hart, had paid good, honest money for them?"

"I didn't know anything about how honest the money was, but I did know he'd paid for them."

"And you sneaked off cattle that you knew he'd paid for, and that without even hinting to him that you claimed them! That's another specimen of your honesty, is it?"

"I'm glad you brought that up," I answered. "I forgot it before. We didn't tell Mr. Hart what we had intended to tell him, because we were afraid of being chased out of the camp. But we paid back every cent that he'd paid for our cattle."

"You paid it back!" shouted the prosecutor, as if boiling over with rage at the mere mention of such an absurdity. "Yes, you know how you paid it back—with sneaking ingratitude! You paid it back as the serpent pays the bosom that warms it! Oh yes, you paid it back!" he scoffed.

"We didn't pay it back in ingratitude or anything of the kind," I answered, indignantly. "We paid every cent of it in cash—except what Hart owed us."

The lawyer started to shout some sneering, incredulous question, but the judge waved him aside and himself put one:

"How could you pay Mr. Hart that money, if you didn't claim the cattle, or tell him what you proposed to do?"

Glad to make the matter clear, I turned to the court. "We wrote a letter of explanation, and put that and the money in an envelope, and dropped it into the tin-box where he keeps all his papers."

"Where was that box? And how did you happen to have access to it?" questioned the court, leaning forward.

"It was in the wagon at the time. Mr. Hart had told me to look after the box, and keep his bills of sale and other papers in shape. If he hasn't found our letter and money yet he will the first time he opens the box. I put the letter on top of everything. We knew that Mr. Hart didn't have any real claim to the cattle—our cattle—but we paid him back what he'd paid out, because we didn't want to do anything that even smelt like stealing."

The judge nodded approvingly again and again as he leaned back and motioned to Rhodes to go on.

After a few more unimportant questions, some of them shouted, some sneered, and some roared at me, I left the stand.

Frank now took my place. He was more used to the ways of courts than I was, and did not stand so much in awe of them. He told his story well, and the prosecuting attorney, though he tried hard and loudly, failed to shake his testimony in the least.

Newt, who next took the stand, did equally well except in one respect. For some reason neither Frank nor I had even mentioned our suspicions that Hart was handling stolen stock. But Newt came out boldly and charged that half the animals in Hart's drove were stolen.

I could see Ame and Ben scowling wrathfully, with a look on their faces which boded ill for Newt if they should ever come upon him in some secluded spot.

I was somewhat alarmed at this wholesale charge, and so was Frank. We had not supposed that Newt would dare make it without better evidence than we now had. When the prosecutor began to

question him on this point Newt, having sworn to mere suspicions, naturally became much confused and embarrassed. Of necessity his answers were very indefinite. For if Hart had been walking in forbidden ways, he had covered his tracks cunningly. Before the ordeal was over, Newt was forced to admit that his suspicions had scarcely a well-established fact to stand on.

After Newt had left the witness-stand, the judge remained thoughtful for a few moments. Then he beckoned to Sheriff Renfro. The officer approached, and was given some instructions in a low tone.

"Yes, your honor," I heard him answer. Then the judge announced aloud:

"Mr. Sheriff, take charge of these three prisoners and guard them safely. I'm taking their case under consideration, and will announce my decision as soon as possible."

The sheriff led us back a few yards, and found a seat for us. I sat against the wall, Frank next, and Newt last. A deputy-sheriff, left by Renfro to guard us, seated himself outside of all.

Frank and Newt appeared not at all anxious about the outcome, and kept whispering together and with the deputy. But I, though hopeful, was both anxious and nervous. Try as I would to think of something else, my thoughts would not let go that subject, and my eyes seemed glued to the judge's face.

I had hoped before that the judge would at once set us at liberty. But the fact that he was taking time to consider our case meant that it was not so clear to him as it was to us. So I waited and watched for some sign that would indicate how the matter was going.

At first he looked well pleased over something, as if he had an agreeable task to perform. Believing that he would be glad to set us at liberty, I hoped for the best. But presently, as he went on with his routine duties, I saw his brow wrinkle to a frown. And the frown remained there.

A case was called, a civil suit of some kind, which I felt little interest in. The judge watched the selection of a jury in a casual way, but I could see that we still occupied the central place in his thoughts. More than once his glance turned in our direction. And the frown remained on his brow till it became a worried look, which gradually grew stern.

My heart sank. I was much frightened. Some instinct told me that the man I was watching had decided upon an unpleasant duty. Soon his eyes traveled toward us again, and met my troubled, appealing gaze. But they quickly turned aside, as if refusing to grant what I would ask.

A feeling of numb dread took possession of me. Now I seemed to foresee plainly what was coming. I turned to my fellow-prisoners to warn them. They were still whispering with the deputy. Sometimes they laughed noiselessly. I marveled that they could laugh.

"Boys," I leaned over and whispered, "it's all up! He's going to decide against us. Don't you see he is?"

They both stared at me. "Look here, Travis, what ails you?" demanded Frank. "You must be badly worked up. How do you know anything about what he's going to do? He hasn't taken you into his confidence. We haven't done a thing that we didn't have a right to do. And the judge can't do otherwise than turn us loose."

"But he can," I insisted. "And he will—he will, I tell you. He's going to order us to jail. We'll be in jail inside of thirty minutes!"

They laughed at me, but I was far past laughing. Dumbly, miserably I sat, plainly foreseeing the fate in store for us. Presently the suit that was being tried came to a standstill for some reason. And

before it had started up again I was startled to hear the judge's voice say, almost sternly, to our guard:

"Mr. Jones, please conduct your three prisoners to the bar again. I'm ready now to announce my decision in their case."

My heart sank within me, like lead, as I marched forward, half-dazed, beside my two cheerful, hopeful companions. When we had stopped and were standing at the bar, I noticed that the stern expression, which boded ill for us, was still on the judge's face. All the kindness of look and manner had fallen from him.

Every person present must have been interested in the decision; for a silence as of death hung over the court-room as the judge leaned forward slightly to speak.

"Prisoners at the bar," he said, in distinct, measured tones, "I have carefully weighed and reweighed all the testimony given by you in your own behalf, and it affords me pleasure to say that I believe it—every word of it. You told your stories so consistently from first to last, and so gave them the true ring of the coin of truth, that it is almost impossible to doubt what you said."

By this time I was feeling as cheerful as a reprieved criminal. Frank nudged me with his elbow, as much as to say: "I told you he'd turn us loose." But that stern look, which had partly faded out when the judge began to speak, now hardened his face again.

"At the same time, young men," he proceeded, "it must be admitted that I may be wholly mistaken. In view of this fact, and also of the very serious nature of the crime charged against you, and of the great importance of punishing every one guilty of that crime, a stern sense of duty requires me to do something I would gladly avoid doing. And that is to hold you till you can bring other testimony to corroborate your own. The improbability of your story makes this necessary. Don't misunderstand me. The law does not require you or any person charged with a crime to prove his innocence. But what you have done—what you admit you have done—is a crime on its face. And it does devolve upon you to prove that this seeming crime was justified by the fact of your owning the three cattle you drove off. This doesn't mean, necessarily, that you will have to be tried in court. The next grand jury, when it convenes, will investigate your case. And if you bring the evidence that I believe you can bring, they will dismiss the charge. But the necessities of justice require that you do this before being set at liberty.

"So my decision is that you be held in bond of five hundred dollars each for the next grand jury; and that, until such bond is given, you remain in the custody of the sheriff. I also specially order that those three cattle remain in the sheriff's hands till the question of their ownership is decided. Take charge of your prisoners, Mr. Sheriff."

Though I had foreseen this decision, and had braced myself against it, it was a frightful blow to me. But Newt and Frank, having marched up to the bar cheerfully, smilingly, to be set at liberty, fairly staggered before the unexpected shock. Frank turned pale, and I saw him clutch the bar in front of him to steady himself. Once he opened his mouth to speak, but realizing how useless further words would be, he turned away.

The sheriff himself now came forward to take charge of us, leaving some of his deputies to attend to matters in the court-room. He walked ahead, and a deputy walked behind us, to make sure that we did not escape.

I moved as if in a dream—a horrible dream. But too well I realized what was meant by the words "custody of the sheriff," and where we were going. At length we were down stairs, in Renfro's office.

"Well, boys," said the sheriff, "do you know of anybody that will sign your bonds?"

"We're a long way from our homes and friends, Mr. Sheriff," Frank replied, in discouraged tones. "So it's little worth while to talk about bonds to us. Who would sign the bond of an utter stanger?"

Renfro was silent, and stood gazing out at the window.

"Are you going to—to put us in—in jail?" I finally inquired. My lips and throat were so dry that I could scarcely speak.

The officer turned slowly. "What else can I do, boys?" he asked, very kindly, almost appealingly. "The court has decided that, unless you find bail, you must remain in my custody. And in the sheriff's custody means either under guard or locked up in jail. There's no dodging that. The law gives me very little discretion in the matter. And so—"

He gazed out at the window again, without finishing. But we could easily fill in the blank.

"And the worst of the matter—or the best of the matter—is that I heard every word of your evidence, and heartily believe you innocent. But little that helps matters for me. I have to obey the court's orders. But you needn't be so much afraid of the jail. You shall be well treated. I promise you that."

"It's not the treatment itself we're afraid of, nor even the jail itself," I explained. "It's the name of having once been in jail. People dearly love to believe what's bad about one, and—"

"Yes, I know—I understand," Renfro answered. "And I'm glad to see you so sensitive about your reputations. But the fact that you're innocent is, after all, the only really important matter. As long as you're conscious of that, you needn't worry seriously about anything else."

He walked over to a desk and talked to a deputy for a minute or two, in low tones, then turned to us again.

"Well, boys," he said, "I suppose we shall have to go. It never improves a disagreeable matter to keep putting it off."

We followed him out. Again I seemed to be walking in a dream—the most horrible dream I had ever dreamed. Through the door we passed, over some long steps in the court-house fence, and on into the street, or square. I wonder if a man on his way to the gallows could feel much worse than I felt as I marched in dull, almost unseeing, misery toward the jail that day.

CHAPTER XXIII.

IN THE SHADOW OF THE JAIL.

AS we were crossing the square, in charge of Sheriff Renfro and a deputy, an old man, gray-haired and gray-bearded, saw us and came to meet us. He looked hard at Frank and me. Supposing that he was staring at us because we were prisoners, I turned my eyes away.

So it would be all the rest of my life, I reflected, miserably. I should forever be stared at as the boy or man who had once been in jail. If I went off to school the other students would point me out as the student who had been behind bars. And no matter what I did or attempted to do, people would whisper to one another of that black spot in my history. And if I ever dared aspire to any position of trust or honor, somebody would rise up straightway and call me a jail-bird.

Old Demosthenes, in that famous oration on the crown, which gave him the title of king of orators, declared that people would rather believe evil than good of other people. And though at this time I had never read that saying, I was already well aware of its truth. I had once known a man who had been arrested and jailed somewhere, on an utterly groundless suspicion. Of course he was promptly released when the mistake was discovered. Yet I had heard one of his neighbors say, maliciously: "Oh, they didn't prove anything against him, but we all know they don't put people in jail for nothin'." And so, I had no doubt, they would say of me.

"Howdy, Mr. Renfro!" The old man was greeting the sheriff. And as they shook hands, the sheriff answered:

"How do you do, Mr. Gaines? How long have you been in town? And how is your daughter by this time?"

"She's gettin' along toler'ble well. She set up a good part of yesterday. I druv in before noon. Believe I know two of these young men, Mr. Renfro. At least I've seen 'em before. Hope they're not in any—any trouble."

I looked at the man. And though there was something familiar about his face, such was my mental condition at the time that I failed to recognize him.

"Well, not in any trouble they won't get out of, I guess," answered the sheriff. "But of course it's a little serious just now. They're accused of driving off somebody else's cattle. But they insist that the cattle really belong to them, though the other man didn't know it, and that they'd been hunting for these very cattle for weeks."

"Well, Mr. Renfro, I hain't a bit of doubt in the world but what they're tellin' the naked truth. I saw 'em away over yander on the Cowhouse River a month or so ago, and they told me they was huntin' three run-away cattle. I recollect that well enough. Some man on the south bank had stopped the cattle and shut 'em up in his paster; but they'd got out and run away ag'in while the boys was still water-bound on the north bank. They made a raft and crossed the river on it, and they ferried me and my wife and my wagon across on it. Where did you find your cattle, boys?"

"We found them first in the hands of some thieves," Frank told

him. "We tried to get them, and couldn't; and then we tried to have the thieves arrested, and couldn't. The thieves are still at large, I guess, stealing other people's stock. But we, the owners of the stolen cattle, are on our way to jail!" He spoke bitterly, almost with tears in his eyes and voice.

"Well now, I'm mighty sorry to hear that—the sorriest kind to hear that," answered the old man. "If I can be of any help to you, boys, count on me every time. I'm a pore man, but I'll do whatever I can for you."

He shook hands with us, warmly, then turned to the sheriff.

"Mr. Renfro, I feel mighty shore in my own mind that two of these boys wouldn't steal anybody's cattle, and I'll tell you why. I promised 'em five dollars to raft me across the Cowhouse. They was in a big hurry to get after their cattle, and didn't want to take the time. They found out, though, that me and my wife was tryin' to get home to our sick daughter, and not a cent would they have. That kind of boys don't drive off other people's cattle, Mr. Renfro. You know that as well as I do. So if my name on their bond is worth anything to keep 'em out of jail, they can have it whenever they want it, and as long as they want it, and welcome to it."

The sheriff brightened at this unexpected offer, and so did we.

"I'm glad to hear you say that, Mr. Gaines," answered the officer. "How much do you suppose you're worth above debts and exemptions?"

"Above debts and exemptions? I don't owe anything to speak of, but—let me see." He went through a mental calculation. "Not over five hundred—just about five hundred dollars, I'd say."

"Well, their bonds are just five hundred apiece," said the sheriff. "Boys, that will give one of you your liberty. Which one shall it be?"

"There's your chance, Frank," I said.

"No, you're the youngest. You take it."

"Nonsense! I'm not so young. And I got you into this trouble. Do you think I'd go free while you're—locked up? Nice opinion you've got of me!"

"Well, then, here's Newt. He walked straight into this tangle just to help us out. If Mr. Gaines would be willing to sign his bond instead of one of ours—"

"No, I'm the oldest steer in this bunch, and I'm not goin' to take to the range and leave you yearlin's penned up. If I could stay free and arrange to free you two, it wouldn't be so bad. But there don't seem to be anything I could do. One of you boys might just as well stay on the outside as not. But if you don't want to, we'll all stick together. We'll all go to jail together, and we'll all come out together when the time comes."

"Travis," said Frank, "you're a little touchier about this jail business than the rest of us. I don't care so very much for being locked up, as long as I know I'm entirely innocent. So you'd better let Mr. Gaines sign your bond, and then you can stay out and look after your cattle."

This was pretty tempting for a few moments. But I knew well enough that Frank, while not so sensitive as I was, was far from feeling as indifferent to being thrown into jail as he would have me believe. And when I reflected that my two friends had got into this trouble through me, it seemed a shame for me to go free while prison-bars shut them in. So I shook my head at the proffered freedom, very regretfully it must be confessed, and answered:

"Stay out yourself and attend to them—you or Newt."

"Well, Mr. Gaines," said Frank, "we're a thousand times obliged to you for your offer, but it seems we can't make use of it just yet. If we should be lucky enough to find somebody that would sign the other two bonds, we'd like to have you help us out then."

"All right. I'll do it, boys. You can count on that."

"So that's your decision, is it, boys?" said the sheriff. "Well, I'm glad you told me what you did, Mr. Gaines. Though not much in itself, perhaps your testimony corroborates what these boys testified to, and it ought to be valuable on that account. I wish we could have had you before the judge."

"If I'd even dreamed I was needed, I'd have been there. Just after I landed in town I was told some young fellers had been arrested here with stolen cattle in their possession; but I didn't go over to the court-house to see 'em, like so many other people did. Mighty sorry now I didn't. Is it too late for me to be a witness?"

"I'm afraid it is, Mr. Gaines, for today. The judge was in the middle of a case when I came away, and he doesn't like to be interrupted. Will you be in town tomorrow?"

"I will be if I'm needed. Yes, I'll come in to see. I'd have to come, whether I wanted to or not. My wife will make me when I tell her what's happenin' to these boys. She's had lots to say about 'em since we saw 'em. Yes, I'll come in."

"All right. And I'm going to have a talk with the judge and see what effect your testimony will have on the case. If it won't do any other good, it may cause him to reduce their bonds. You see, Mr. Gaines, the court didn't hold these boys because he really believes them guilty of any crime. But, just as a matter of precaution, he wants them held till some other evidence besides their own can be heard. He's down on cattle-thieves, Judge Wheeler is; and it would break his heart if he turned one loose. That's the main thing that makes him so cautious."

Our hopes had been rising and falling, alternately, with this conversation. But when the sheriff announced that he would attempt nothing till the next day, my hopes dropped instantly to zero. That would not save us from what I so much dreaded.

"Couldn't—couldn't you do something now, Mr. Renfro?" I appealed. "Tomorrow will be too—too late."

"No, tomorrow will be all right. You see, boys, what Mr. Gaines has told me, and some other things, have made me decide to take some responsibility upon myself for one night. If you'd like to know, I don't mind telling you that the way you hang together has something to do with my decision. There are innocent people in the world foolish enough to imagine that the easiest way out of a trouble of this kind is to run out of it. But boys that won't desert one another when they have a chance—a legitimate chance—won't be likely to run off and leave the man that befriends them in the lurch. So you shall not go to jail tonight. That is, if you'll pledge me your word not to try to escape. You can occupy a room at my house; and perhaps I'll sleep in the same room with you. It's right close to the jail—in the shadow of the jail, in fact. But maybe you'll like it better than that dreadful place itself." He laughed.

"We don't care where it is—by the jail, or on the jail, or under the jail, or anywhere else, provided it's not in jail," I informed him.

We now left old Mr. Gaines, who assured us again that he would be in town next day, and that whatever he could do for us, whether as a witness or as a bondsman, would be done.

The sheriff's residence was at the outer edge of the little town. And just behind it stood the one-story stone jail, with its narrow, barred windows. I shuddered at the sight of it. We afterwards learned that the place was pretty well filled with horse-thieves, cattle-thieves and other lawless characters that infested this part of Texas at the time.

As we entered the house the sheriff's daughter, a girl of fifteen or

sixteen years, met us in the hall. After a few words with her, the officer conducted us to a back room and held open the door.

"This will be your quarters for the present," he informed us. "I must ask you not to leave the room without permission. And you'll have to give me your solemn word that you won't; that is, if you're to spend the night here."

Each of us promised, and then went in. It was a neat room, of good size, and there were two beds in it.

"Either I or one of my deputies will sleep in there with you tonight," the sheriff informed us, as he shut the door and went away.

Probably he returned to the court-house; for we neither saw nor heard him for some time. But we heard other people about the house, and the voices of children at play in the yard.

Somewhat weary after our excitement, we sat down. Our surroundings were so much better than we had expected a short time before that, but for the veil of uncertainty that hung over the future, we should have been almost happy.

"Well, boys," I remarked, "our situation might be better, and then again it might be a great deal worse."

"Yes, and the worst thing about it is that it's likely to get worse before it gets better," answered Newt, rather gloomily.

"That's true enough," admitted Frank. "We've been prisoners at the bar today. Tomorrow we may be prisoners behind the bars." He laughed, rather feebly, at his own joke.

"No, I'm hoping for something better instead of something worse," I assured them. "A few minutes ago there didn't seem to be anything on earth that could keep us out of jail. But there was something, and I'm hoping that there'll be something else till we get clear of this whole tangle."

Some time later Sheriff Renfro opened the door and put his head in to inquire if we needed anything. We mentioned the fact that our horses and cattle were over at the livery-stable, with nobody to feed them or care for them. He assured us that he or one of his deputies would attend to that matter at once. Some of them would have to go over there to serve legal notice upon the livery-stable keeper that, in accordance with the court's instructions, he must not allow those cattle to be taken away, under penalty of the law, till the question of their ownership was decided.

The sheriff informed us that he himself had stable-room, and would bring our horses over to his own stable. But the cattle would have to be left where they were for a day or two, till he could find a pasture to put them in.

He went away, but returned before a great while to tell us that our three horses, with our saddles, were now in his stable, and that both horses and cattle had been watered and fed.

Soon afterward he opened the door again, this time to say:

"Come in to supper, boys." And then he added: "You can understand what I think of your innocence when I invite you to my own table. No prisoner or anybody else that I believe guilty of stealing or any such crime has ever been invited to sit down with my family."

"We're much obliged to you for your confidence in us, Mr. Renfro," Newt answered.

"And we haven't done anything to keep us from deserving it," Frank assured him.

"And what's more, we don't intend to do anything," I assured him.

We were seated at a rather long table, with Sheriff Renfro at one end and his wife at the other. Two deputy-sheriffs and several of the Renfro children, including the girl we had seen, were at the table with us. A Mexican woman was waiting on the table.

Frank talked as much as any of them, but Newt and I had little to say, except when the sheriff or his wife spoke to us. Not much was said at first about how we came to be here. But later, commencing in reply to Mrs. Renfro's questions, Frank and I told the whole story of the search for the lost cattle, from the morning I had started from home till tonight.

"Well, you have had a long, eventful hunt," the woman remarked, after our story had been concluded. "It's a shame that you should have got into such an unpleasant situation by what you did. But of course it's not very serious. You'll soon get out of it."

"I certainly hope so," answered I. "In fact, I know we will. But even at the best it's going to be a bothersome matter. My father will have to leave home and make a wagon-trip of three or four hundred miles, coming and going; and maybe he'll have to bring a neighbor or two with him to identify Lep. And Frank's people will have to do the same, though they won't have to come so far. It's sure to be troublesome business, any way we can fix it."

"And it's so humiliating," declared Frank, disgustedly. "To think that two fellows as big as we are started out to find a few cattle, and instead of finding them and driving them back we have to send home for somebody to come out and find us."

"Yes, I'll be ashamed to go back home, even if I do keep out of jail," I remarked.

"Well, you needn't be," spoke up the sheriff. "Very few boys would have stuck to the trail as you've stuck to it. And I don't know any other two boys anywhere that could have done as well as you've done, under all the circumstances. In fact, I don't know that I could have improved on it much myself."

Supper was finished just as night was coming on. The deputies went away, and Renfro conducted us back to our room. He showed us a lamp and matches, but we did not care for a light. We heard movements outside from time to time, and voices, but were too busy thinking and talking about our own affairs to notice them much. But presently we were startled by cries from the jail:

"Help! help! help!" It was a girl's voice.

Up we sprang, all three, tore open the door and burst into the hall. Just then the sheriff's daughter rushed into the house.

"The prisoners have killed father, and they're escaping!" she screamed.

CHAPTER XXIV.

IN THE CUSTODY OF THE SHERIFF.

FROM the first, I think, we had surmised what was the matter. As the girl rushed into the dimly lighted hall we were looking about for weapons.

"There! there!" She pointed to the wall, where several six-shooters and some guns were hanging.

I snatched a six-shooter out of its holster and started for the jail. Newt and Frank were with me.

Just as we reached the jail-door it swung outward, and a grim, desperate-looking man appeared. There were others at his heels.

Instantly Frank and I thrust our six-shooters under the leader's nose and ordered him back. Newt had armed himself with a Winchester rifle, and with this he also covered the prisoners.

"Go back! go back! go back!" he shouted, "or we'll blow you back!"

The leader of the jail-breakers stood for a few moments, gazing straight into the muzzles of our cocked weapons, as if thinking of coming on in spite of them. Then he uttered a string of fierce oaths, cursing his luck, and turned to his companions.

"The jig's up, boys," he said, quietly but bitterly. "I didn't know the house was full of men. We might as well go back."

And back they went, cursing but conquered. A yard or two inside the outer door was a grating, with a grating door in it. The inner door was also open, and the prisoners passed back through it, sullenly.

A lamp was burning inside the jail, and by its light we could see the sheriff lying on the jail-floor, as motionless as if dead. His wife and daughter were now behind us, both begging us to get him out.

We hesitated, for the prisoners' faces all wore a disappointed, vengeful scowl.

"I'll go in," Frank proposed.

"All right; go ahead," answered Newt. "We'll keep you covered, and if anybody dares touch you, or even go near you, we'll drop 'im in his tracks."

Frank ventured inside, and had soon half carried and half dragged the unconscious sheriff to the door. Then, after the jail-doors had been closed and securely locked, we carried the officer across the yard into the house. Soon after we had laid him on a bed, he opened his eyes.

At Mrs. Renfro's request, I had been on the point of starting for a doctor, and Frank and Newt to hunt up some of the deputies. But Renfro now called us back. He had been struck over the head with a rather light piece of wood, and was not seriously hurt.

"I'm going to be all right in a few minutes," he said. "What happened, anyway?"

His wife and daughter explained. And while they were telling him, it occurred to me that we had no right to be outside of our room. I was starting to apologize for it, but Renfro, now sitting up, stopped me with a gesture.

"It's a lucky thing that you had too much sense to stand on the letter of your promise," he remarked. "I exacted that promise for

ordinary circumstances. A hundred cases might arise, I suppose, where I should expect you to break it. For instance, if the house burns down while I'm away. I don't want you to stay in that room and burn to death, like foolish little Casabianca, just because I'm not here to tell you to come out. I've no use for a man or a boy that hasn't a strict regard for his word. Neither have I much use for a man or a boy that hasn't a little common-sense to mix with his honesty."

We now returned to our room, and a few minutes later the sheriff put his head in at the door.

"Boys," he said, "I'm a thousand times obliged to you. If I had the authority, I'd gladly tell you that you're at liberty to go where and when you please. But I'm only the sheriff, not the court. I will tell you, though, that you're at liberty to go where you please about this house and grounds. I did intend to sleep in the room with you, but that won't be necessary now. Good night to you!"

It was late when I fell asleep. And there's no use denying that I passed a somewhat restless night. High above everything else towered the ghastly fact, for me, that we were already in the shadow of the jail, which was yawning for us, and which might yawn still more widely tomorrow.

When at last sleep came to me, I dreamed of being at home. And everything seemed so lifelike and natural there that it was a rude shock when I awoke to find myself where I was and what I was—a prisoner.

We did not talk with the sheriff till we came to the breakfast-table. And then he assured us that he was not feeling particularly the worse for his unpleasant experience of the night before. We had not learned all the particulars of the attack on him, but now he told us.

He and Nannie, his daughter, had gone to the jail to take the prisoners their supper. The jail consisted of one large room, with a row of cells across the back side for the most dangerous characters. Leaving his daughter at the outer door, the officer had gone inside to carry their suppers to the prisoners in the cells. Before leaving the inner door he had taken the precaution to lock it from the inside. But he carried the bunch of keys in his hand, so as to unlock the cells. While he was passing the supper into a cell, one of the outside prisoners stole up behind him and struck him on the head.

Nannie Renfro, expecting nothing of the kind, happened to be looking outside, and did not see her father struck; nor did she hear him fall. But she looked a minute or two later, and saw him lying on the floor, and the prisoners rapidly unlocking the cells with his keys. Then she screamed for help.

But for the time spent in unlocking the cell-doors and the grating door the prisoners might all have escaped. The sheriff had not worn his pistol into the jail, as he usually did; and for that reason the escaping prisoners were all unarmed. Once out, however, they would doubtless have gone through the house and secured the weapons there. And with the aid of those they could easily have secured all the other weapons they needed.

After breakfast the sheriff said to us:

"Boys, this is going to be a busy day with me, and I shall have to leave you to entertain yourselves. I must ask you to stay close about the house, and in doors as much as possible. So far as I am concerned, you could ramble around as much as you please. But Judge Wheeler has pretty stern ideas, and if it came to his knowledge that you were running about town without having given bond he'd be pretty sure to call me before him in open court and order me to lock you up. So you can see that it's much to your interest to lie pretty

low just now. Don't forget please, that you're still prisoners, and under guard. I don't know what the judge would say if he knew that I had left my daughter to guard you; but that's just what I'm going to do. Nannie, here are your prisoners. Look after them."

"I will father," the girl answered, coming forward. But she blushed and dropped her eyelids. After her father had gone she looked up and said, half shyly:

"I won't be a very strict guard. You don't mind being my prisoners, do you?"

"Indeed we don't!" exclaimed Frank. "In fact, we'd rather be your prisoners than go scot-free."

The girl blushed again, and laughed shyly. But it was easy to see that she was pleased. She was brown-haired and brown-eyed and demure, and rather small. When the color played over her cheeks she looked so pretty that I envied Frank his ability to make her blush. I fully intended to say some pretty thing to her myself; but though I was usually readier with my tongue than Frank I failed to think of anything suitable at the time.

We remained at the sheriff's residence during the whole of this day. At noon Renfro told us that he had tried to have a talk with Judge Wheeler, but had failed to find a suitable opportunity. He would try again in the afternoon, however. Old Mr. Gaines and his wife, whom we had rafted across the Cowhouse, were both in town, ready to testify in our behalf.

Not long after dinner the old couple stopped in to visit us, and remained an hour or so, talking over our experiences and theirs since we had seen them, and before. Both assured us that they were ready to do everything they could to help us out of our trouble.

On going away they returned to the court-house to listen to the proceedings there, and to be ready, if occasion offered, to brace up our evidence with theirs. After they were gone, we expected Renfro to send for us; but the summons failed to come.

Frank and I found various ways to amuse ourselves during the day. Newt, who was rather shy of women, remained in our room, reading. But we two spent much of our time where Nannie and her mother were, sometimes in the parlor, sometimes in the dining-room and sometimes in the kitchen, helping to wash the dishes, or peel potatoes, or shuck roasting-ears. With these pastimes we forgot our troubles, and joked much about the fact that we were prisoners, with only a pretty girl to guard us.

When the sheriff came home, after court had adjourned for the day, I easily read from his face, before he uttered a word, that he had no favorable news for us.

"Well, boys, I talked with the judge. But that's all the good it did. Judge Wheeler is one of the most peculiar characters I've ever had any dealings with. Take him outside of the court-room, and he's one of the kindest-hearted men I've ever known. In fact, he's kind-hearted enough on the bench till he comes to decide a case. Then he freezes up as hard as an iceberg. He prides himself that he never allows his feelings to influence his judgment in the least. He likes nothing better than riding rough-shod over his own feelings. I've heard him insist more than once that the judge and the man should be distinct—as distinct as two men."

"From what you say, I can easily guess that he refused to do anything for us," remarked Frank.

"That's just about the size of it, boys, I'm sorry to have to tell you. I explained to him what old Mr. Gaines would testify to. He considered the matter a minute, then decided that he could not release you on that testimony. He admitted that the new evidence corrobora-

rates your story, and strengthens it. But he insisted that that's not what is needed. He says the only question is whether the cattle you drove off belong to you. All the evidence except yours proves that they belong to Hart. The only evidence to the contrary is your own; and as you're all interested parties he insists that your ownership should be established by other testimony.

"Then I told him how promptly you three boys came to my assistance last night, and that you probably prevented all the prisoners from escaping, and perhaps several murders before the matter was ended. And what do you suppose he said?

"He demanded to know what you three were doing outside the jail. I explained that I was trying to save your feelings, and I can assure you that he looked anything but pleased. In fact, I half expected him to reprove me sharply for favoring you, and then give me peremptory orders to lock you up. But he didn't. If your case should come before him again, no telling what he might order."

"Then, for mercy's sake, let's not have it come before him again if we can help it," I put in, hastily, alarmed at the prospect.

"I wish we'd had our examining trial before a justice of the peace," said Frank. "He couldn't have treated us worse, and he might have treated us better."

"Well, I think we can work the matter all right, boys. I've not forgotten what you did last night, and what's more, I don't intend to forget. And I'm going to keep you out of jail as long as it's at all possible. You can count on that. While the judge has decided that he can't release you altogether on the new evidence, he has agreed to have you before him again to see if he can't reduce your bonds on it. I believe he will—I'm pretty sure he will. He thinks he can hear you some time tomorrow, and Mr. Gaines and his wife have agreed to come back.

"If he'll reduce your bonds to about half, I think I can get bail for you tomorrow. And even if he doesn't, I've got a well-to-do man out in the country that will sign all your bonds as soon as he comes home. But I don't know just when he will come home."

We were not a little surprised. "Why, Mr. Renfro, who can that be?" inquired Newt.

"His name is Evans. When he was a young fellow, about the age of Frank here, he got away from home, among strangers, and was arrested on some suspicion and thrown into jail. He tried to convince them that they had the wrong man, but they only laughed at him. They kept him locked up a month, till the right man happened to appear, then they turned him loose. Of course he was really entitled to damages. And he could have got them, I've no doubt, if he'd brought suit. But he was only too glad to get away.

"He was a sensitive fellow, like Travis here, and that month in jail nearly killed him. It rankles in his memory yet, like a thorn in the flesh, even after thirty years. He told me of that experience a day or two after I was elected sheriff, the first time, and he warned me to be cautious. Then he said to me: 'Renfro, if it ever devolves upon you to jail anybody that you have good reason to believe innocent, don't do it—don't do it. Send for me, and I'll sign his bond.'

"I sent out there last night, and asked Evans to come in right away. But he's off on a trip to San Antone. He may get back in a day or two. But I've left word with his family, and I'm sure he'll come the minute he gets home. I think there's no doubt but that we shall be able to arrange the matter somehow."

"I hope so; I certainly do," said I.

"That judge is a flint-hearted creature," the sheriff went on. "I tried to convince him that, even supposing you three had been guilty

of driving off three long-horns from somebody's drove, you ought to be set at liberty for preventing a jail-delivery. 'Now, Renfro,' he said, 'you're letting your feelings run away with your judgment.' That was so cold-blooded that it provoked me a little, and I demanded to know if he didn't think that the service you had rendered the state by keeping seventeen criminals from escaping would more than counterbalance the mistake of driving off three cattle. He assured me that he certainly did think so. But he insisted that neither judge nor jury can rightly take any account of what a man has done for the state. Their province is to determine whether or not the man has done anything against the state, and to punish him or set him at liberty accordingly.

"He admitted, though, that the governor, if application were made to him for a pardon, might well consider the other side. And he even went so far as to tell me that if an application for a pardon for you were brought to him he would not only sign it, but would write a letter to the governor, urging him to grant it."

That provoked me. "We're very much obliged to his high-and-mightiness," I said angrily; "but we're no more criminals than he is, and we're no more likely to be convicted than he is, and we're in no more danger of needing a pardon than he is."

"That's right," spoke up Newt. "And if he'd had sense enough to hammer sand in a rat-hole he'd have told us to go, without puttin' us to all this trouble."

"Well, he's got sense enough, Judge Wheeler has," the sheriff said. "But he has certainly got a lot of eccentricity mixed with it. And that's the kind of a man we've got to deal with. It may be a great thing to have a legal mind; but it seems to me that a man may sometimes be like the Indian's pole—so straight that he leans the other way. But things will come out all right sooner or later, I've no doubt."

CHAPTER XXV.

A SENSATION IN COURT.

WE spent another night very much as we had spent the first one in Renfro's house. A deputy-sheriff came in and occupied the bed with Newt. But both he and the sheriff were careful to explain that he was not there as a guard, but because there was no other place for him to sleep.

"What do you think of little Miss Nannie Renfro?" inquired the deputy, after we had all gone to bed.

We all thought very well indeed of Miss Nannie, and said so. Frank was especially enthusiastic over her.

"You think she's a timid little creature, don't you?" asked the deputy.

"She certainly is pretty timid," I answered.

"That's just where you miss it. She looks like she'd run from a mouse, and scream at the sight of a spider. But that's only Nannie's way. She is a modest little thing. But she's not afraid. Would you believe it? That shy little girl can shoot like a cowboy. In fact, she learnt it from cowboys—some cousins of hers that live out here a few miles. Her father never taught her anything of the kind. But she used to visit her uncle, out on the ranch, and the boys made a pet of her. They found out that she's fond of a pistol, and they let her shoot to her heart's content. She's a good revolver-shot. And grit—she's got more grit than nine-tenths of the men."

"Why do you think so?" Frank inquired.

"I don't think so. I know so. You see, boys, this was not the first jail-delivery that has been attempted here. The other one happened very much like this; but Renfro was away from home, and the man that got knocked senseless in the jail was a deputy-sheriff, a fellow named Adkins that Renfro had left in charge of the prisoners. At that time—it was about a year ago—there was a notorious desperado in jail here. You've heard of him, I guess. His name is Edsell—Bill Edsell."

"Heard of him!" exclaimed Frank. "Why, we rafted him across the Cowhouse River."

"Oh, you've seen 'im, then?"

"No, we've never seen him," I answered. "That is, I don't suppose we have. What does he look like?"

The deputy described him, and then we knew that we had actually seen the desperado twice, once at the mill in the mountains, and again two or three days later with the cattle-thieves. After we had told the deputy of those experiences he said:

"Well, that same Bill Edsell was in this jail a year ago. Renfro had arrested him a few miles from here. It was the only time, I guess, that Bill was ever arrested. A few men have lost their lives trying to take him; but Renfro got the drop on him and Bill wilted down. Renfro knew what a dangerous character he was, and he handcuffed him and locked him in a cell. But Bill picked the locks of his handcuffs, and got them off and passed them to the prisoners outside. And when Adkins went into the jail, they hit him over the head with them and knocked him senseless."

"Nannie had been at the door; but one of the prisoners had asked her for something, and she had returned to the kitchen for it. When she got back to the jail-door she saw Adkins lying on the floor, and the prisoners busy with his keys.

"If there had been any men about, she might have screamed for help like she did last night. But, as it happened, her mother and the children had gone visiting a few minutes before, and there wasn't another soul on the place. The grating-door was locked, but it could be unlocked from the inside, and she knew that the prisoners would be all out and gone before she could go for help.

"So she ran back to the house, and when the prisoners came to unlock the grating door, Nannie met 'em with one of her father's six-shooters. The man with the keys was going right ahead, without paying any attention to her. But the little girl cocked the six-shooter, aimed it point-blank at his right eye and said:

"The instant that key touches the lock, I pull the trigger!"

"The man looked at her and saw that she meant business and then he backed down. One after another tried it, but she kept saying that when the key touched the lock she would pull the trigger, and not a rascal of 'em had the sand to touch the lock.

"Finally Bill—the terrible Bill Edsell himself—tried it, after cursing the others for cowards. But when it came to the scratch, even Bill weakened, and didn't dare touch the key to the lock. He admitted afterwards that the six-shooter aimed straight at his eye proved a little too much for his nerves. He was reckless enough to take any kind of a risk, but not reckless enough to buck against certain death.

"Bill and the whole gang tried every way they could to scare the girl, but there wasn't any scare to her. She didn't budge an inch. She held the whole gang under her six-shooter for half an hour till a neighbor's children happened in, and then she sent them for help. And when help did come, and the men all began to praise her for a brave girl, she just ran off and hid herself. She don't even like to talk about it."

We discussed the subject at some length, and finally Frank inquired:

"If Bill Edsell was in jail here, how does it come that he's at large now?"

"Oh yes; I was going to tell you that. The sheriff of another county came here and got 'im, and Bill turned some kind of a trick on the road and got away. And he's been on the range ever since. Guess he'll be pretty hard to rope in next time."

The story that the deputy had told us of Nannie Renfro's courage was a surprising one to me, and I thought of it not a little before falling asleep. Next morning, when she and I happened to be in the parlor, she noticed me looking at her curiously, laughingly.

"What are you laughing at me for?" she demanded.

"I'm not laughing at you," I hastened to assure her. "I'm laughing to think how badly three fellows were fooled."

"I don't understand," she answered.

"Why, when your father told us he was leaving you to guard us, we thought it was all a joke, and that if we'd felt like it we could have walked off and left you. But it's lucky for us we didn't try to walk off. We might have heard some bullets whizzing after us."

But, so far from being pleased the girl pouted and turned her back to me.

"Somebody has been telling you about—that," she said, resentfully. "I wish I'd never touched a pistol—almost. Wherever I go since that happened everybody looks at me just like I was a little catamount with claws. And I'm not—any such thing! I couldn't hurt anybody—unless I just had to. I couldn't hurt a grasshopper."

It must be confessed I liked her better for this modest disclaimer than if she had been proud of what she had done.

Soon after breakfast the sheriff left his home for the court-house. He gave us no instructions before going; but we understood the prudence of keeping indoors as much as possible, that reports of our liberty might not travel abroad.

But about ten o'clock two deputies came for us. They were new men to us. Neither of them knew anything, except that we were wanted at the court-house. Nannie Renfro came in just as we were starting out.

"Your father has sent for us," Frank told her in reply to her questioning look. "Perhaps he wants to take us before the judge again. No telling what that judge will do with us this time. He may hang us."

"I just wish I could be in Judge Wheeler's place for a few minutes. I'd tell you to go so quick it would make your heads swim," declared the girl indignantly.

"Then I wish you could be in the judge's place," Frank answered. "That kind of swimming in the head would be just the thing I'd like about now. We'd soon be on the road toward home."

But the girl was not altogether pleased. "I don't think you ought to be so eager to run away," she said demurely, as if a little hurt. "Since you became my prisoners, I've been just as nice to you as I know how to be."

"That's right; you have," spoke up Newt.

"Of course you have," said I. "You haven't shot a single one of us."

She looked at me indignantly.

"That you have been nice—indeed you have!" Frank assured her. "You needn't pay any attention to his jokes. But that's just a good reason for us not to trouble you any longer than we have to. But we'd better not keep these men waiting."

We went out, the five of us, and were soon at the court-house. Sheriff Renfro met us at the door.

"You could have come just as well by yourselves, boys," he half whispered. "But it's not prudent to have you seen going about unguarded. Go in there and take a seat with our guard. The judge says he'll call you before him again just as soon as he gets through with the case he's hearing now. Old Mr. Gaines and his wife are both in there, ready to testify for you."

We entered the court-room and found a seat by a window. One of the deputies went away to attend to other duties, but the other remained to guard us. Frank was next to the window, and I was between him and Newt. Newt was whispering with the deputy and Frank was gazing down into the square.

I busied myself with watching the proceedings of the court, and particularly Rhodes, the prosecuting attorney. He was cross-examining a witness, and I noticed that his manner was just as warlike toward this man as it had been toward me. Then I understood that it was simply the lawyer's way, perhaps the only way he knew, and by no means an evidence of ill-feeling.

As I sat there, reflecting on our situation, I began to feel decidedly gloomy. At the best, as it seemed to me, my father, and perhaps a few of the neighbors for witnesses, would have to come all the way out here to rescue me from my unseemly predicament. And possibly, when they did come, they would find us lying in jail. It would be a humiliating ending of an ox-hunt.

"Frank," I said, moodily, "it was an unlucky day for you when I stopped at your house—I and my troublesome old ox. I should think you'd be sorry you ever heard tell of us."

"No such thing!" he answered, half indignantly. "I'm not that kind of a fellow at all. Fact is, I despise people that can't have a little run of bad luck without trying to saddle the blame on somebody else. I don't believe we've done anything to be blamed for—anything we didn't have a perfect right to do. But if we did, I'm just as much to blame as you are. And then, as I told you once before when you talked like that, it might have been worse. It's bad enough for three of us. What would it have been if you'd got into this scrape by yourself? No, sir, we'll not shirk. We'll all stand together. We'll go to jail together if we have to, and then we'll get out and laugh over it together."

He resumed his gazing down into the square. A few minutes later I saw him lean forward suddenly, eagerly. The next moment he leaped to his feet, uttering some half-suppressed exclamation that I failed to catch, and started for the door!

Our guard, taken unawares, supposed that one of his prisoners was escaping. He threw out his foot, and Frank, tripping over it, fell heavily to the floor. But with an angry exclamation he bounded up and rushed on, with the deputy after him and reaching for him. Seeing that Frank would get to the door first, the officer shouted:

"Stop 'im there, somebody! Don't let 'im get away! Grab 'im! Hold 'im!"

Instantly the whole court-room was in an uproar. The crowd sprang to their feet excitedly, to catch a glimpse of the escaping prisoner. I sprang up with the others, half believing that my friend had suddenly turned crazy.

Several men at the door tried to stop him. The first one he flung aside so violently that the man fell to the floor. But others quickly fastened themselves upon Frank. He struggled hard to get through, pushing and dragging them about.

"Let me go! Get out of my way!" he cried, loudly enough to be heard above all the tumult.

But the pursuing deputy seized him, and three or four other deputies rushed up and threw themselves upon him. And presently the whole knot of them went to the floor together.

"What under the sun is the matter with the boy?" demanded Newt of me. But I could not answer. We stood watching the struggling group.

Presently they opened out, and all rose to their feet. When I first got a good view of Frank he was standing very red in the face, in the midst of the group of officers.

"But I tell you I saw my sister down there, and I want to stop her before she gets away!" he was fairly shouting, angrier than I had ever seen him before.

"Where?" inquired a deputy, in incredulous tones.

"She was in a spring-wagon, and the wagon was driving out at the north-west corner of the square. She was leaning out and looking back when I saw her. What did you stop me for?"

The officers exchanged significant glances. Plainly they believed that Frank had really tried to escape, and had invented this story to cover his failure.

"Where did you see the wagon?" inquired the chief deputy.

"Come over here!" cried Frank. And he almost dragged the officer to a north window.

"Well, where is it?" demanded the deputy, after looking down. "No spring-wagon down there."

"Of course there's no spring-wagon down there!" Frank almost shouted, in angry disgust. "It was out of sight an hour ago! Send somebody after it, if you won't let me go. Stella would be just the witness for us—the very witness we need."

The chief deputy shrugged his shoulders and smiled cynically, as if to say he could see through all such tricks as that.

"If you're going to do anything do it, and don't be all day about it!" Frank exclaimed, impatiently. I had never seen him so badly worked up. "If you wait, you'll never find them in the world. I don't know where they're going."

All business had been suspended, and there was still no little bustle and confusion in the court-room. But above it all could now be heard the calm voice of the judge:

"Mr. Sheriff, I suggest that you do as the young man says, and send somebody after that spring-wagon. There's no doubt that such a wagon passed through town just before this commotion started up. I noticed it myself."

The deputy started to comply. But just then Renfro, who had been out somewhere, came hurrying in to learn what was the matter. Somebody had informed him that a prisoner had tried to escape. Frank quietly explained, and the sheriff, turning to one of his deputies, said:

"John, go down there, mount the first horse you can lay your hands on, and follow that spring-wagon and bring it back, and every one of its occupants. Put them all under arrest if they won't come without it. And be quick as you can, too. We'll soon see whether there's any mistake or not."

"Yes, sir! All right, sir!" answered the deputy, as he passed through the door, almost at a run.

A little later, looking down from the window, I saw him spring upon one of the numerous horses hitched to the court-house fence, and gallop away.

The sheriff now called the court-room to order again, and business went on as before. I half expected the judge to say something by way of rebuke, but he spoke not a word, either good or bad, concerning the disturbance.

Frank came back and sat down in his place by the window, and the deputy came back to guard us. Frank, it was easy to see, was still not in the best humor.

"If those idiots had let me alone, I could have caught that spring-wagon," he muttered to me, resentfully. "They must think I'm mighty anxious to get away—the greenies! I wouldn't run off if they sicked the dogs on me. Wonder what Stella's doing away out here, anyhow."

"Are you sure you were not mistaken, Frank? Maybe you just saw somebody that looked like her."

He turned on me, almost indignantly. "Think I don't know my own sister? How could I be mistaken? Stella looks like herself, and like nobody else in the world."

"That's so," I had to admit. "But the girl you saw was a good distance away. And what could your sister be doing out here?"

"Well now, that's more than I know. Let's see. Father and mother must have come home, and Mary and Oliver may have come with them. Mary is my married sister, you know, and Oliver is her husband—Oliver Oldham. After staying with the folks a while, Mary and Oliver must have started out here somewhere, and Stella must have come with them. But where can they be going?"

"Your sisters may be on a hunt for their poor, lost brother?" I suggested.

Frank grinned. His good humor was returning.

"Their poor, lost brother rather needs somebody to hunt him up. But it's more likely they're out here to visit some of Oliver's kinfolks. I don't know much about my brother-in-law's people. I've never lived

close to him, or any of them. My sister got acquainted with him while she was teaching school, down near Waco. And the only time I ever saw him was last fall, when he came up to marry her and take her off. But I do remember hearing him say that he had a married sister living out here west of the Colorado somewhere. Yes, that must be the way of it. Lucky thing for us they happened along, too. Stella's the very witness we need. I'd rather like to see father just now; but as a witness for both of us—for all of us, Stella will be better. She saw you and your steer, and father never did. Yes, sir, it's a rare piece of good luck for us. Takes that deputy a long time to catch them, though."

We both waited impatiently, fidgeting about, and looking out at the window every minute or two. Most of the other people in the courtroom were also waiting, I think; for I could see them glancing often toward the door.

CHAPTER XXVI.

ORDERED TO JAIL.

HALF an hour dragged by, and still the spring wagon was not in sight. I was beginning to feel sure that Frank must have been mistaken. But the deputy had not returned, and until he did return there was room for hope.

"Oh, he's fearfully slow!" Frank grumbled, impatiently. "Why didn't they let me go alone? I could have caught that wagon on foot long, long before now."

Gradually, after an hour had crept by, the expectant look on the faces of the people around us had given place to cynical smiles.

"They wa'n't no sich a wagon. I'll just bet a ginger-cake they wa'n't," one man whispered to another in the seat behind us. "That young chap did actually make a dash for liberty, and he's just tryin' to pull the wool over the sheriff's eyes."

"But the jedge, he seen it too. Didn't you hear 'im say he did?" the other man whispered back.

Just at this point Frank, who had been leaning far out at the window, drew his head in to announce, triumphantly:

"Well, it's in sight at last."

He spoke loudly enough for the people close around us to hear. And the news went buzzing through the crowded court-room till a deputy-sheriff had to pound his desk and call for order.

Gazing down into the square I saw a black-topped spring wagon drive up to the court-house fence, the deputy-sheriff riding by it. As we afterwards learned he had at first followed the wrong road. The wagon stopped, and a man I had never seen before sprang out at one side, and a girl leaped lightly to the ground from the other side.

There was no mistaking that slender, alert young figure. It was Stella Booth. Short as was the time I had known her I should have recognized her instantly among a thousand people.

She looked up. Her brother waved to her, and so did I. We now hurried down stairs to meet them, accompanied by our guard. We found them at the court-house door, and some excited greetings followed. Frank's surmise as to how Stella came to be here proved to be exactly correct, and Newt and I were introduced to Oldham and his wife. The traveling party having learned from Frank's letters before starting from home that we were out in this part of the country were less surprised to see Frank and me than we were to see them.

After matters had been fully explained on both sides we all climbed the broad stairway to the court-room, and all sat down together. At first I was slightly embarrassed over the predicament Stella had come and found us in; but she was so sympathetic and so indignant over the treatment we had received that I quickly began to feel myself a martyr rather than a blunderer.

A few minutes after we had seated ourselves the judge announced:

"Mr. Sheriff, if there is any new evidence in the case of the State against Lindsay, Booth and Holloway, you may now bring those three prisoners before me."

Accompanied by our guard we walked forward and occupied the chairs for persons on trial. I glanced around, and saw that the court-

room, already pretty well filled, was rapidly being crowded with people. Our arrest here had caused a sensation in this quiet little town; and the report having gone abroad that new developments were expected in our case everybody had come to the court-house that could possibly get there. The big room was soon packed to the doors and windows with men, women and children. Among the crowd I caught sight of Nannie Renfro's face.

Sheriff Renfro now came up behind Frank. "Shall we put Mr. Gaines on the stand first, or your sister?"

"Stella first, I guess."

The officer now turned to the crowded court-room and called out:

"Miss Stella Booth will please come forward!"

I turned my head and watched the girl walk down the aisle. Her cheeks were flushed prettily from excitement, and her eyes were downcast. But her little heels clicked the floor resolutely, almost defiantly. She seemed just a trifle shy and embarrassed when, after being sworn, she took her seat in the witness-chair. But at the first question she turned and looked the judge squarely in the eye. Tense silence prevailed throughout the court-room.

Judge Wheeler himself, in the absence of any lawyer to represent us, asked questions to bring out the facts for our side. After inquiring the witness's name, where she lived, and how she came to be here, he said:

"Prisoners, will all of you please stand up?" We stood.

"Now, Miss Booth, tell me whether you recognize any of them."

"Yes, sir, I do—two of them. This one on my right is my brother Frank. The one next to him is a friend of ours, though we haven't known him very long—Mr. Travis Holloway."

Then the judge questioned her as to how she came to know me. She told of the coming of the spotted ox, and then of my coming in search of him two or three mornings later. She then explained how it happened that her brother and I had started off together, trailing three cattle instead of one.

"Can you describe any of those cattle?" inquired the judge.

"I think I can describe all of them, sir." And she proceeded to do so, commencing with the young ones. Presently the judge stopped her with a gesture.

"Mr. Sheriff," he said, "have you a description of those three cattle?"

"Not an accurate description, your honor. But the cattle are close by. I can get one very soon if it's needed."

"Well, never mind at present. I don't think it will be needed. You may proceed now, Miss Booth."

Stella went on with her description. When she had finished with the young cattle the court remarked:

"You know those two pretty well."

"I ought to, sir," she answered, modestly. "I ought to know every hair on them. I milked their mammies from the time they were little things till they were weaned."

"And concerning this spotted steer, do you recall any particulars of his appearance?"

The girl described Lep almost as minutely as I could have done. "And he had a raised brand on his left hip," she said in conclusion. "The letters looked like W H; but only the H was raised so that you could tell certainly what it was."

"You seem to be a pretty careful observer," remarked the judge. "I congratulate your friends on having so bright and intelligent a witness. Mr. Rhodes, do you care to ask this young lady any questions?"

The prosecuting attorney looked at his notes. I was indignant at

the thought of his bellowing at Stella as he had at us and other witnesses. But, to my surprise, he was very respectful, both in the questions asked and in the manner of asking them. I heard the explanation that afternoon.

"Did you notice how polite Rhodes was to the young lady?" a deputy sheriff inquired of me.

"Yes, I did. Why can't he be as nice to everybody?"

"He will be—some of these days. When he was first elected prosecuting attorney he tried to bulldoze a girl on the witness stand. A few minutes later her brother caught him out on the square and emptied his six-shooter at him. He wasn't touched, Rhodes wasn't, but he was nearly scared to death. And since then he minds his manners when women are concerned."

But one new point did the prosecuting attorney bring out in his cross-examination.

"How did you happen to notice that spotted steer so closely? Are you sure you didn't get that description from your brother or young Holloway just before you were called to the stand?"

"Yes, sir; I'm very sure I didn't get a word of description from anybody—today. You see, we knew the steer was a stray when he first stopped at our house, and my brother was going to post him. We went out to where he was standing, and looked him over carefully to get a good description of him. Then we went back to the house and wrote it down."

"So I see—so I see," remarked the attorney, as he referred to his notes again.

A few more questions, all of them unimportant, ended the cross-examination, and the witness was excused.

As she passed back to her seat, she flashed us a look of triumph out of her dark eyes, which said as plainly as words: "They didn't confuse me."

Mr. Gaines was now called to the stand. He told how Frank and I had rafted him across the Cowhouse, and managed to bring out the fact that we had refused to accept the promised five dollars, and the reason. At this a buzz of approval ran through the crowded courtroom. The witness also testified to what we had told him about hunting for three lost cattle.

Mrs. Gaines was not called, her testimony being considered unnecessary by the sheriff, and also by the court.

After the old man had been excused the judge sat very still, seemingly lost in thought for a minute or two. Silence—the silence of suspense—reigned throughout the court-room. Nobody moved or spoke; and even the breathing itself seemed suppressed.

Finally the judge leaned forward and addressed the prosecutor:

"Mr. Rhodes, do you know of any reason why the case against these three young men should not be dismissed, and the prisoners discharged from further custody?"

"None whatever, your honor."

"You may have noticed, Mr. Rhodes," the court went on, "that while the young lady testifies that two of these cattle probably belong to her father, there was not a word in her testimony to prove that the third animal belongs to either of the prisoners. Consequently young Holloway still has nothing to prove his ownership of the spotted steer."

I stared at him, aghast. Was he about to release my companions, and still hold me on that flimsy pretext?

"Yes, I noticed that, your honor," the prosecutor rose to say. "But at the same time I am aware that there isn't a jury in Texas that would waste a minute in acquitting Holloway after listening to Miss

Booth's evidence. I would like to be excused from prosecuting that kind of a case, if it please the court."

"Yes, yes; I suppose so—I suppose so," admitted the judge, thoughtfully. But soon he spoke again:

"I've no doubt you're right there, Mr. Rhodes. But there's one point I must insist upon. And that is that Miss Booth positively identify the three cattle the prisoners drove off as being the ones that she has just described. So the court's instructions to the sheriff are as follows:

"But first I want to inquire, Mr. Sheriff, if the three animals these prisoners are charged with stealing are still in your possession?"

"They are, your honor. They are in the pen behind the livery stable."

"Very good. Then the court's instructions to you are that you conduct the witness, Miss Booth, to that pen and let her see the cattle. If she positively identifies all three as being the animals described in her testimony, you will promptly discharge all the prisoners from further custody. If she identifies two of the cattle, the younger ones, but not the big, spotted steer, you will discharge her brother and Lindsay, but young Holloway must be held for the grand jury. But if, for any reason, the witness should be unable to identify any of the cattle, then all the prisoners must be held as before instructed.

"And another word to you, Mr. Renfro. It has come to the knowledge of this court that some undue leniency has been shown these prisoners during the time you have had charge of them. Now I want to say to you that this court expects you to keep all prisoners in your custody in the safest place. And the safest place, the only really safe place in fact, is the county jail. Do you understand the court's instructions?"

"I do, your honor," growled the officer.

"And it should be unnecessary for me to remind you that this court has done such a thing as to send a sheriff to his own jail for doing what he thought was right instead of what the court had instructed. Is a word to the wise sufficient, Mr. Sheriff?"

"It is, your honor," answered Renfro. But from the way he snapped out "your honor," I knew he would far rather have said, "you old fool!" And his face flamed a fiery red at the court's implied threat.

"Very well," said the judge. "You may now adjourn court till two o'clock."

"The old rascal!" I muttered to my fellow-prisoners. "He's determined to get us behind the bars!"

"Yes, he is," said Newt. "If I have to go to jail, I'd like to have him in there with me about five minutes. I'd hammer some of the nonsense out of 'im."

"Oh, never mind, boys," said Frank. "All that talk don't amount to shucks. Stella will identify the cattle—every hoof of them. Never fear about that. And Judge Wheeler knows it as well as I do."

As we started out of the court-room, still guarded by officers, Stella and her sister and brother-in-law joined us.

"Wasn't it a piece of good luck that we happened to pass through here today, to help you out of your trouble?" Stella said to me.

"It wasn't luck; it was Providence working in our behalf," I assured her. And I certainly meant every word of it.

"Well, boys," said the sheriff, now coming up to us, "I guess we might as well walk over to the pen together, and have done with this troublesome matter. I'm glad you're getting out of the tangle at last."

"On going down stairs we found the crowd, or part of it that had preceded us, waiting for us in the court-house yard. And as our party crossed the square toward the livery-stable, the whole crowd

followed us. They had heard the court's instructions, and were curious to see if Stella could identify the cattle, and by so doing set us at liberty.

To our no small surprise, close behind us came the lawyers, the prosecuting attorney, and even Judge Wheeler himself. The sight of the judge was rather unpleasant to me; for I could not forget his harsh instructions to the sheriff concerning us. Very glad was I that we were about to escape from the ogre's clutches at last.

"Do you think you can identify Lep?" I inquired of Stella, as we were passing around the livery-stable. For in spite of the fact that we were still prisoners, and under guard, she had placed herself between Frank and me.

"Certainly I can," she assured me. "I didn't see him many times, but he looks so different from the common run of steers that I believe I'd know him among a thousand. I'm glad I noticed him as closely as I did, because— What's the matter now?"

By this time the advance portion of the crowd, which seemed to number every soul in town, had passed round the livery-stable and stopped at the pen behind it. And everybody was staring in blank amazement.

"Well, where are your cattle, Mr. Sheriff?" inquired the prosecuting attorney, now coming up, with the judge.

The sheriff stood like one struck dumb. "They were here this morning," he finally replied.

"But they don't seem to be here now," remarked the judge, sweeping the empty pen with his glasses.

The discovery that the three cattle were missing created a sensation in the big crowd, which promptly surged up to the fence to see for itself.

"Ask the livery-stable man about 'em, Renfro," called out a voice.

"Yes, ask Wilson," spoke up another voice. "I saw 'em here not long ago. Maybe he moved 'em to some other pen, or sent 'em off to grass."

"Here comes Wilson now," said a third voice, as the livery-stable keeper pushed his way through the crowd. He, too, stared incredulously when he came to the rail-fence and saw nothing inside of it.

"I left 'em here about two hours ago, when I went over to the court-house," he explained. "And that's all I know about 'em."

Now there was a greater sensation than before. While it was at its height two small boys, who had been playing not far off, wormed their way through the crowd till they reached the sheriff.

"Are you all lookin' for them cattle that was in this pen, Mr. Renfro?" one of them asked.

"Yes, we are, Benny," answered the sheriff, directing his attention downward. "Do you know anything about them?"

"Yes, we do. We saw two men open the gate and drive 'em out, and then drive 'em off."

"What road did they take, Benny?"

The little boy pointed toward the south—the road we ourselves had come.

"And what did the men look like?" the sheriff asked.

The boys started to describe them, but before they had uttered many words Newt burst out excitedly:

"It was Ame Watson and Ben Dankens! Of course it was! I could have told you that at the start."

Further questions proved that Newt was right. Ame and Ben had taken advantage of the fact that the livery-stable keeper and nearly everybody else had gone to the court-house to turn the cattle out and run them off.

When the news had spread over the crowd, as it very soon did, that

the men who had accused us of stealing the cattle had themselves stolen them from the sheriff's custody, the sensation that followed was something past describing. Even the judge and the prosecuting attorney seemed astounded at the turn affairs had taken.

In discussing the matter before, Newt and Frank and I had wondered that Ame and Ben, knowing as they must that Hart had stolen animals in his drove, had dared to drag us into court. And now we agreed, in the light of this latest development, that they had never really intended to do so. They had applied to the sheriff to get the cattle for them, and had got more than they bargained for when they were required to prosecute us. Tiring of the law's tedious delays they had taken the three cattle and fled.

"Well, Mr. Sheriff," the judge finally remarked, "the witness is unable to identify the cattle, and you recollect what the court's instructions were with reference to the prisoners, do you not?"

"Did you hear that?" muttered Frank. "He's ordering us to be locked up!"

I was thunderstruck—too much so to utter a word.

"Do you mean, judge," inquired the sheriff, "that in spite of what has just happened you expect me to drag these boys off and throw them into jail?" His voice trembled with indignation.

"Those were certainly the court's instructions; and I'm glad to see you've not forgotten them, Mr. Sheriff. All instructions issued by my court must be obeyed to the letter, or the disobedient party will feel the full weight of the court's wrath."

CHAPTER XXVII.

INTO THE WILDS.

FOR a little while after it had dawned upon my dazed faculties that the judge was coolly ordering us to jail I stood like one in a stupor. We had all come out here confidently expecting to be set at liberty, and this cruel disappointment had met us instead. Freedom had seemed so near, but had suddenly taken wings.

I felt the eyes of the whole crowd upon me, and Stella Booth's eyes in particular. It would have been hard enough to go to jail privately; but to be marched off in sight of all this multitude would be a hundred times worse. But for Stella's kindly, half-tearful, half-indignant gaze, there is no telling what I might have said in my shame and humiliation. Hot anger burned in my heart at the injustice of it, and especially toward Judge Wheeler. But I clinched my fists, set my teeth hard together and stood calmly, defiantly.

"But, judge," the sheriff was protesting, "after what has taken place you'll surely change your instructions, won't you?"

"Mr. Renfro, I am not on the bench at present, and my court can scarcely be said to be in existence just now. And of course a court not in existence can't possibly change instructions issued when it was in existence. You heard what was said, Mr. Sheriff. The question is: Are you going to obey?"

I watched Renfro, and waited anxiously for his reply.

"Judge Wheeler," he answered, speaking very deliberately, "you're the judge of the circuit court, but I'm the sheriff of this county. I have some authority as well as you, and I propose to maintain it. These three prisoners are innocent yet, not only in fact, but also in the eyes of the law, and until they're convicted some discretion is left to me as to how they shall be treated. You have ordered me to keep them safely and I will. But I'm the judge of what is safe-keeping. And you know as well as I do that they're in no more danger of being convicted of that crime than you or I. They've done me an important service, and the whole community and the state an important service, and I tell you bluntly that I have favored them, and that I expect to keep on favoring them. I'm trying to make bond for them. But until I do I'll keep them safely. If necessary I'll have them guarded day and night—at my own expense, understand.

I was wonderfully relieved. For it was easy to tell from Renfro's looks and tones that he had fully made up his mind and would be hard to move. But I wondered what the judge would say.

"Oh well, if you prefer to guard them at your own expense, that's no concern of the court's, of course. Did you say you're trying to get bail for them, Mr. Renfro?"

"Yes. But their bonds are so large, and we're all so poor out here, it's an up-hill job. I can make bond for one of them and probably for two. But they prefer to stick together—all free, or none. I've got a strong man that will sign their bonds as soon as he comes home."

"So I see," remarked the judge, thoughtfully. "Mr. Renfro, speaking not as the judge of the district court, but as Thomas A. Wheeler, private citizen, I want to ask if you will accept my signature on their bonds?"

The sheriff stared, and so did we, and so did everybody else.

"I will, your honor."

"Mr. Renfro," remarked the judge, "it seems to me you've held your office long enough to know that a judge ceases to be 'your honor' the moment court is adjourned."

"So I do, judge," laughed the sheriff. "But you gave me such a shock I forgot myself. Are you serious about signing the bonds?"

"Certainly I am. Have you got them made out? Then let's go somewhere where we can find a pen. But I doubt if I'm worth fifteen hundred dollars above debts and exemptions. Somebody else will be needed."

"I'll sign their bonds," spoke up the prosecutor. And then and there I freely forgave him for all those questions he had bellowed at me.

"Mr. Rhodes," observed the judge, "can't you see that there might be some impropriety in a circuit attorney's signing the bonds of prisoners he may be called upon to prosecute?"

"Yes, I can. And I can also see how improper it might be for a judge to put his name on the bonds of prisoners that may be tried before him. But as we both know beyond a doubt that these cases will never come to trial, the whole thing is a mere matter of form, and we can do as we please about it."

"If you need any more names, mine's ready," now called out a man we had never seen before. He was the leading merchant in the town.

One after another offered their signatures, till more than a dozen signers had volunteered.

The livery stable keeper invited all of them and Renfro to step into his office; and when they came out the sheriff informed us that, for the present, we were at liberty to go where we pleased. This was a wonderful relief to us.

The first thing I did was to approach Judge Wheeler and thank him. "It was a great surprise to me," I admitted. "I thought you were determined to have us behind bars."

"Well, I do like to have my instructions obeyed," he answered. "But I always see to it that they don't work an unnecessary hardship. I'm pretty strict, but I'm not so bad as some people think me. No, I'm not so bad."

I could readily agree with him now, though I should have found it hard to do so a short time before.

Frank and I hunted up all who had signed our bonds, and after thanking them we assured them that they should not be put to any trouble or inconvenience by our failure to appear.

When we came back to where Renfro was standing, talking to a group of men, the judge was saying:

"That's about as bold a piece of villainy as I ever heard of."

"I'll have the sneaking rascals in jail before sundown tomorrow," declared the sheriff, hotly.

"If you can catch them," qualified the prosecuting attorney.

"I'll catch them. Never fear about that—the scoundrels! I'd have put them under bond, or locked them up for witnesses, if I'd thought of their running away."

"Rather queer kind of an officer you are, Renfro," remarked Rhodes, jokingly. "You arrest the owners of the cattle at the request of the thieves, and then keep them in durance vile while the thieves are running off with the cattle."

"After an experience or two of that kind, one can't wonder that these young cattle-hunters chose to rely on their own efforts rather than on officers of the law to recover their stolen property," observed the judge, smiling, and gazing around blandly through his glasses.

Renfro winced, but said: "The sheriff admits that he permitted himself to be made a fool of. That isn't half so strange, though, as that the honorable court, which of course is vastly wiser than the

wisest sheriff, should have perpetuated the sheriff's stupid blunder by holding the owners of the stolen cattle for the grand jury, and even ordering that they be kept in jail. And the prosecuting attorney, learned in the law, and zealous in enforcing it, aided and abetted the honorable court in perpetuating the sheriff's blunder."

Judge Wheeler smiled again, not quite so blandly this time, it seemed to me.

"We all blundered absurdly. There's no denying that," he admitted. "Such things have a tendency to destroy one's confidence in the workings of human justice, so called."

"Well, I'm responsible for my blunder," announced the sheriff. "Boys, go back to my house and make yourselves at home, and keep your horses in my stable, till I bring back your cattle. I'll get them if they stay inside the state. And I'm sorry this thing happened. I feel as bad about it as any of you possibly can."

"Oh, that's all past and gone. Never mind about it now," said Frank.

"As long as you didn't actually jail us, there's no great harm done," I assured him. "I shouldn't have liked to go home and tell that I'd spent a week or two locked up, even though I am entirely innocent."

"I'm glad I saved your feelings," answered the sheriff. "But I must be moving, or those rascals will have a long start of me. I've got a lot of things to do before I can get off."

"Better let us go with you," spoke up Frank. "Our horses are well rested by this time."

"Yes, we'd rather go than hang around here," said I.

The sheriff weighed the matter. "All right; come with me if you want to. I may need you to identify two of those cattle. I might not know them. And I may as well arm you and swear you in as deputy-sheriffs. Then you can be drawing pay for the time you're out. I shall have to leave several deputies here to attend to the court's business. You are rather young to be officers—even temporary officers. But what you lack in years you make up in grit. What do you say?"

Frank and I were willing enough. And Newt, who had been undecided, now also volunteered to go.

Frank's friends were expecting to camp for dinner just outside the town, and he and I were to have dinner with them. But the hospitable sheriff overthrew our plans and took all of us home with him.

The latest developments in our case were the talk of the town. And wherever we went people stopped us to say how glad they were that we had established our innocence beyond question. Some wanted to denounce Judge Wheeler for holding us under bond after all the rest of the world was convinced that we ought to be set at liberty. But that we refused to listen to. The ways and technicalities of courts we did not understand; but we did understand that the man who had signed our bonds could hardly bear us any ill-will.

Oldham's brother-in-law, whom he had come to visit, lived only about five miles from town, in a northwesterly direction. After dinner at Renfro's Oldham and his wife and Stella drove on out there. And it was understood that Frank and I should follow just as soon as we got back with our cattle.

The sheriff had numerous matters to attend to after dinner, and it was four o'clock by the time we were ready to take the road. After swearing us in he furnished each of us a Winchester rifle, and Frank and me a six-shooter apiece. Newt's own six-shooter was returned to him. Each rifle was in a scabbard, by which it was fastened to the saddle, the stock to the horn, and the muzzle, after passing back under the stirrup-leathers, against the horse's flank. The belts that

our six-shooters hung from were heavy with cartridges.

At last we were ready, and our party of five rode away. One of the regular deputies accompanied us. Besides our arms each of us carried a blanket and slicker, tied behind his saddle. And we also had some provisions with us, especially dried beef. That was light, and we could live on dried beef and water if necessary. We hoped to return the following day or the day after. But of that there was no certainty.

We rode as fast as prudence would permit, and reached the Fort Concho trail just at dusk. The tracks of our three cattle and their drivers turned west here; and west we also bent our course. After pushing on nearly an hour after nightfall, we went into a dark camp by the road-side. Soon after daybreak next morning we were in the saddle again.

Arriving at the place where three of us had escaped from Hart's party, we crossed the creek and looked up the valley. But the cattle-camp was no longer there. All the signs indicated that the camping place had been abandoned at least two days before. The trail of the cattle led toward the fort, and toward the fort we pushed on after them.

"It's plain enough that Hart had moved on before Watson and Dankens arrived here," observed the sheriff. "And they've all got a pretty good start of us. We can't hope to overtake them much this side of the fort; that is, if they keep traveling, as they're very likely to do."

The distance from here to Fort Concho was supposed to be nearly eighty miles, and away we went, at a steady gait, our course a little north of west. It was an unsettled country we were now traveling through. Sometimes, at long intervals, we passed a cattle-ranch. But the road was well beaten; for some of the supplies for the fort were wagoned along here, and most of the supplies for the outlying ranches.

All day long we rode. Late in the afternoon we overtook a train of big wagons, each drawn by six mules. They were on their way to the fort, the drivers told us. But they had seen no cattle on the road, neither the main drove nor the three animals driven by Ame and Ben.

We camped in the valley of a creek that night, and next morning early were on the road again.

During the forenoon we met some wagons from the fort. The teamsters informed us that they had passed two droves of cattle the day before. Later in the day they had also met two men driving three cattle. Ame and Ben had not yet overtaken Hart. We received similar news at a ranch, where we halted for dinner.

At night we camped on the bank of the Concho River; and the sun was not very high next morning when we rode up to Fort Concho.

The fort consisted of a good-sized tract of ground and a number of buildings, mostly of stone, the whole enclosed on three sides with a stone wall. From the top of a tall flag-pole a bright new flag was fluttering in the morning breeze. We halted to make inquiries, and to lay in some supplies for our further journey.

An armed sentinel, pacing back and forth across the entrance, stopped us when we started to go in. But an officer came out and invited us to enter. After obtaining some provisions Renfro went to call on Colonel Davis, the commandant of the fort. The rest of us strolled about the grounds, looking at whatever of interest we could find.

Some soldiers soon began to drill near the center of the grounds, and we stood and watched them. When the sheriff came back we mounted and rode on.

There was no hurry now. Having learned when our cattle had passed the fort, we did not expect to overtake them until they got to Hart's

ranch. At noon we rested and grazed our horses for two or three hours.

The trail was now leading us in a northwesterly direction, and was seldom very far from the north or main fork of the Concho. The country was usually open prairie; but in places it was covered with mesquite bushes.

From time to time we noticed bunches of antelopes, most of them a good distance away, and running at the top of their speed. Once, late in the afternoon, we made out five animals that looked like crooked-back cattle. They were buffaloes. Newt told us that there were still a few stragglers left up in this part of the country. But they were wary and hard to find, and it was only by the merest accident that we caught sight of them. The little herd made an interesting spectacle as they lumbered away awkwardly across the prairie, finally disappearing over a rise.

Night overtook us in some brushy country, and in the brushy country we camped. We did not start as early as usual next morning, but remained in camp to let our horses graze. We camped again an hour or two before night to do some hunting. It was Renfro's good fortune to bring down a young antelope with his rifle, and we had fresh meat, broiled, for supper. The rest of us had tried to kill something, but had failed to get within range.

Early next morning we were on the road. An hour's ride brought us to a ranch, near the south bank of the Concho. There were some ranch-houses of logs, with mounds of earth on top of them for roofs. Not far away were the corrals, or pens, with a few hundred head of cattle in them.

Four men, a white man, a black man, and two Mexicans, were busy branding cattle, preparatory to turning them out on the range. The men were Hart and his hands; and the cattle were the same that we ourselves had helped to drive. But I looked in vain for Lep's spotted back and great horns among the drove; nor could I hear his bell. And Ame and Ben were not among the branders.

As our party rode up to the pen, Hart walked over to the fence. He paid not the slightest attention to those of us he knew; but he remarked to the sheriff:

"You're looking for some cattle, I guess—three cattle."

"That's right," replied Renfro. "And I see you know about them. Where are they? And where are the two men that drove them off?"

"Describe the cattle you're lookin' fur."

The sheriff described them, and Hart said:

"That's what I thought. Well, they're not here, and the men are not here. They overtook us yesterday, only about an hour before we got to the ranch. They put the three cattle in my drove, and then come along with me. But after we'd got here, and they told me how they'd come by the cattle, I let 'em understand mighty quick I didn't want cattle got in any such way."

"And what became of them, and of the cattle?" inquired the sheriff.

"Well, we had some sharp words, and I told 'em straight up and down they'd have to cut the three animals out and take the back trail with 'em, or quit workin' for me. I let 'em know that what they'd done was just about the same as stealin', and that they'd better straighten the matter out as quick as they could. The fact is, they were about half drunk that day, or they wouldn't have been fools enough to slip the cattle off like they did. And after they come to their senses they was afraid to go back. So they just followed on after me as hard as they could."

"And what did they do?" asked the sheriff.

"They swore they never would drive the cattle back. Then I ordered 'em to cut 'em out and travel; and that's what they did. I didn't

want 'em hanging around me. I may sometimes get a few stolen animals into my drove without knowing it. But I don't do anything but a straight business myself, no matter what all the liars may swear to."

He glanced contemptuously at Newt; and I easily understood that Ame or Ben had told him what Newt had sworn to in court.

I had always doubted if Hart were as dishonest as Newt had believed him. And now something in the way this was said made me doubt very much if he were as dishonest even as I had believed him. And while there are different grades of honesty, and Hart's was probably not the best, the fact that he had refused to have our cattle in his herd, after Ame and Ben had brought them, made me doubt if he were dishonest at all, at least from his own point of view.

"Which way did the men start with the cattle?" inquired the sheriff.

"They set off up the river," the ranchman replied. "They cain't be a great distance; for they started only about an hour ago. There's a good big drove of cattle up that way somewheres, and they may be tryin' to overhaul that."

"Do you know anything about that drove?"

"No. I don't. They passed me while I was in camp, back at the edge of the settlements. I was away from camp and didn't get to see 'em. And they've been just a few miles in advance of me ever since. I'm told they've got about a thousand head of cattle and two or three hundred head of horses, and a big force of hands. I don't know where they're makin' fur, or anything about it. They cain't be a great ways from here yet. I saw the smoke from their camp-fire somewhere up the river this morning."

We now started on, following the trail that the other drove had made. But we rode very slowly at first. Renfro seemed doubtful as to our proper course.

"What do you think, boys? Did he tell the truth?" he wanted to know, turning to us who knew Hart.

"Yes; not much doubt about it," I answered.

"You think Watson and Dankens haven't just run those cattle off into the brush somewhere to wait till it's safe to bring them back?"

"No, I don't guess they did," answered Newt. "Hart's got all the meanness in 'im the law allows, but he won't lie, even in a trade. So I ruther guess he told just about the straight of the matter."

"Well, we can soon find out," said our leader. "Pity we didn't start earlier this morning. But if they're only an hour ahead of us it oughtn't to take long to run them down. So here goes!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

DEFIED BY DESPERADOES.

THE trail we were now following was newly made, seemingly, but well beaten out. There had probably been a dim wagon-road there before. It was an hour later, perhaps, when we came to where a big drove of horses and cattle—the drove that had trampled the trail—had spent the night. A camp-fire was still smoking. We pushed on, and not a great while afterwards came in sight of the moving drove. A covered wagon was following close behind it.

Soon I detected the familiar tones of a bell; and, as we drew nearer, I could distinguish Lep himself among the cattle. There was an unusually large force of hands. Indeed, we counted an even dozen mounted men. And among them we soon made out the two cowboys we were looking for, Ame and Ben.

Our approach was discovered presently, and it caused no small commotion among the drivers. The big drove was stopped, and all the cowboys could be seen galloping to the rear. When we were between three and four hundred yards off the whole party suddenly threw up their Winchesters, and one of them shouted:

"Halt there!"

I detected something familiar in the voice, and also in the man's appearance. Suddenly I recognized him, with a dismayed start. It was the desperado Bill Edsell—sometimes known as the sheriff-killer. And among his party I recognized the other men who had once thrust their six-shooters at Frank and me.

We halted at once, and Renfro said to us:

"Draw your guns, boys, but don't fire unless I give you the word. That's an ugly crowd we've run against. And they outnumber us more than two to one. I didn't think about finding the cattle in that scoundrel's hands. That's the worst desperado in Texas."

Up from their scabbards came our Winchesters. After trying the locks to see that they were in good working order, we held our rifles in readiness to shoot.

I don't know how the others felt, but I was pretty nervous. However, it would not do for me, a deputy-sheriff, to show the white feather. So I set my teeth hard together, gripped the rifle-stock, and looked and felt as brave as I could.

"What do you want, Renfro?" demanded Edsell, holding his gun almost in readiness to fire.

"We want three cattle in that drove," the sheriff called back.

"Is that all?"

"And I've got warrants for the two men that drove them off."

Instantly a dozen guns rose up and covered us. We also threw up our guns. Everything indicated that there would soon be a hot battle. I found myself wishing we had been in the woods, where there would be something to hide behind; or at longer range, where there would be less danger of being hit. Then I began to wonder how it would feel to get shot, and a good many similar things.

"Well, come on and get them if you want them!" shouted Edsell, defiantly.

The sheriff sat quietly in the saddle, rifle in hand, eyeing the gang of desperadoes sharply.

"Guess they're rather too many for us, boys," he said, speaking to us, but still keeping his gaze fixed on the armed horsemen ahead. "We might fight it out with them, but I think there's a better way to deal with that gang—a way that's not quite so dangerous."

He waited a little while, then lifted his voice and called out:

"Guess you're too many for us, Bill. We shall have to let you go. But you'd better turn over those three cattle to me."

The outlaws lowered their rifles, and so did we.

"Oh yes, we'll turn them over! Come right along and get them, Renfro!" Edsell called out, with a fierce oath and a mocking laugh.

Our two parties stood eyeing each other suspiciously for a few minutes. Then the other fellows turned their horses, slowly.

We did the same. But we kept our eyes behind us and our guns in our hands till the desperadoes and we were at least half a mile apart.

"Well, we certainly ran against a hard crowd that time," remarked the sheriff, while we were riding slowly along the trail toward Hart's ranch.

"And what are we to do now?" I wanted to know. "Strike back for the settlements and let the cattle go?"

I was much disappointed and discouraged. It looked as if, after following Lep for hundreds of miles, I must return home empty-handed. To me his value seemed increased by all the time and hard riding and worry he had cost me. But more than his value was at stake now. It had become a matter of principle with me not to go home without him. And would Judge Wheeler ever release us from our bonds if we failed to take the cattle back? But what could we do?

"Indeed we'll not let them go," replied the sheriff, anger in his tones. "It's more than the loss of three cattle now. It's a question of whether the law shall be openly, impudently defied. We'll find a way to deal with that gang. Never fear about that."

He did not explain his plans at the time. But after we had ridden a mile or two further, he said:

"We might pick our chance and attack those fellows, and kill several of them, and get ourselves killed, some of us. But as long as there's help within reach it's neither prudent nor necessary to do that. There are plenty of soldiers at Fort Concho, and I can get them by calling for them."

"And are we going to ride back to the fort now, Mr. Renfro?" inquired Frank.

"I've just been debating that question. At the fort I was told of a party of Rangers camped only a few miles from here. They're lying pretty low, because there's a lot of thieves and outlaws in this part of the country that they want to capture. In fact that's what they're here for. Those fellows that stood us off are probably some of the gang the Rangers are after. I didn't mention the matter to you boys before, because it was told me in confidence."

"Where are the Rangers, and how can we find them?" inquired the regular deputy.

"They were making their headquarters over yonder to the northeast on a creek that runs into the Colorado. I got all the information I could, because I knew we might need them. Colonel Davis marked their position on my map. We can find them if they're still where they were. But they may have moved or even left the country. They're state troops, of course, and I'd rather use them if we can locate them than to call on the United States soldiers at the fort."

"And if we fail to find the Rangers, what then?" inquired Newt.

"Why we shall have to ride back to Fort Concho. But it has occurred to me that we'd better divide our party, some of us to start for the fort now and some to go in search of the Rangers. How

would you and Travis and Frank like to make the ride to the fort to carry a note to Colonel Davis for me—a request for soldiers?”

“I’m ready for the trip if the others are,” answered Newt. And Frank and I were willing.

“You can deliver the note, and then either wait there, or guide the soldiers up here if they need any guiding. If we find the Rangers and capture those fellows, we’ll meet you somewhere on the trail between here and Fort Concho. If we don’t find the Rangers we’ll wait at Hart’s ranch. Make as good time as you can, but don’t ride your horses to death.”

We now stopped and the sheriff, taking out a note-book, laid it on his saddle-horn and penciled a note to the commanding officer at the fort. Armed with this Newt and Frank and I set out on our long, lonely ride. The distance was sixty or seventy miles. The sheriff and his one remaining deputy left the trail and struck across the country toward the northeast, where the Rangers’ camp was supposed to be.

Before our party of three had ridden a mile further we met four men on horseback. All were well armed and they were riding fast. Just before they got to us one of them, whom I recognized as Sheriff Dugan, called out, addressing Newt:

“Did you meet a drove of cattle and horses?”

“You’ll find ’em two or three miles further on, but—” replied Newt. The horsemen hurried by us, without waiting to hear the rest.

“And when you do find ’em, you’ll wish you hadn’t,” remarked Frank, turning in the saddle to gaze after the party.

“There goes our noble sheriff—the fellow that wanted to arrest us instead of the thieves,” I explained to Newt. “The thieves he wouldn’t arrest are in Edsell’s gang back there. I wonder if he’s found out at last that they’re not quite such paragons of honesty as they pretended to be.”

“If he hasn’t found it out, he will before he’s much older,” answered Frank. “I wonder how he ever managed to strike such a lively gait.”

“And who would have believed that Dugan would venture as far from home as this?” said I. “Hope nobody will get hurt.”

“They’ll soon come a-kitin’ back,” predicted Newt. “They don’t know what a big, woolly crowd they’re runnin’ onto—any more than we did.”

We rode on. A mile or two more brought us to Hart’s ranch. Hart had seen us coming—coming alone—and he walked out and waited by the rode-side. There was nothing in his hand but a cattle-whip. Newt, I noticed, looked a little uncomfortable. And I myself did not like the expression on the ranchman’s face.

“Just hold up here a minute, Newt Lindsay,” ordered Hart, as we came to where he was standing.

“I’d ruther not have any words with you, Hart,” answered Newt. But Hart’s manner was the manner of a man who would not be refused, and we had to stop.

“I don’t care what you want,” replied the ranchman, as he laid hold of Newt’s bridle-rein with no gentle grasp. “I don’t propose to let any low-down scoundrel treat me the dirty way you’ve treated me, without tellin’ ’im just what I think of ’im.”

“I’ve told you once I don’t want any words,” Newt said.

“And I’ve told you I don’t care what you don’t want,” replied the ranchman, with an oath.

“Newt’s right. What’s the good of quarreling,” I spoke up.

Hart glared at me. “I’ll have a few words for you two when I finish up with this skunk.”

Then he turned to Newt again, his face showing signs of the anger he was controlling.

"Didn't I always treat you on the square, Newt Lindsay?" he demanded, fiercely. "Didn't I always pay you the day your money was due, or even before if you needed it? Did I ever swindle you out of a red cent? Did you ever know me to swindle anybody, white man or nigger or Greaser, or to get anything without payin' for it? No, you never did, and you know it as well as I do. Then what do you mean by goin' into court and perjurin' yourself by swearin' that I'm carryin' on crooked business?"

"You did have cattle in your drove that had been stole," protested Newt.

"How do you know I had?" demanded Hart.

"Because the owners came and claimed 'em."

"They did! How do you know they was the owners?"

"Why, because they said so."

"Because they said so!" exclaimed Hart, sarcastically. "If a fellow was to come along and say your horse and saddle belonged to him, you'd hop right off and tell 'im to help 'imself, would you?"

"No, I wouldn't. But that's different—very different."

"No, it's exactly the same thing. You wouldn't surrender your horse; but I'm a scoundrel because I don't turn over cattle I've paid for to the first blowhard that bobs up and claims 'em! The biggest fool thing I ever did was to keep such a lunatic as you around me for a whole year! I've half a mind to drag you out of that saddle and wear this whip out over your worthless back!"

He had worked himself into a rage, and was speaking so loudly and excitedly that none of us saw or heard half a dozen horsemen till they were almost upon us. Then Vic began to bark. The horsemen had just come out of some brush which bordered the road in the direction of the fort.

"Yonder's the black scoundrel that stuck his six-shooter under our noses when we claimed our cattle!" shouted one of the men, the moment Hart turned from Newt to face them.

I looked up at the speaker, and recognized the blustering settler that Hart had disarmed and put to flight that day at noon. Newt had hit the mark when he predicted that those men would return. But they were several days later than he had foreseen.

Every man of the settlers was well armed, and several guns were quickly leveled at the surprised ranchman. I saw him glance toward the ranch-house, as if wishing himself there. But the odds were against him, and he held up his hands when ordered to do so. A settler now rode up and took Hart's six-shooter.

By this time another party of horsemen had emerged from the brush; and more and more kept riding into view, till there seemed a little army of them. By actual count there were eighty-two. Hart was surrounded, and his hands were securely tied behind him. His face had the color of ashes, but he said nothing.

When all the vigilants had arrived Hart was marched over to the cattle-pens. Black Sam and the two Mexicans had been busy there a few minutes before, but now they were nowhere to be seen. They had fled to the brush.

The vigilants at once began to pick out animals that belonged to them. By the time they had finished nearly fifty head of Hart's cattle had been claimed. Hart stood quietly, uttering not a word of protest.

"Well, boys," said the blusterer—the man who had felt Hart's six-shooter against his breast—"I don't see any use wastin' valyble time. Yonder's just the right kind of a tree!"

He was pointing to a big pecan that grew near the river-bank, a hundred yards away. Several others endorsed the suggestion, and

the party moved toward the tree with their prisoner. We sat in our saddles and waited.

"Poor Hart!" exclaimed Frank. "That's the end of him, I guess. Those fellows know exactly what they want to do, and nothing can stop them."

As the vigilants were moving off with their prisoner, two of them rode back to us.

"What you fellers doin' here?" one of them demanded, rather suspiciously, it seemed to me.

"We trailed some stolen cattle out here," I answered.

"Oh! Then you're here on the same business we're on. Come over and see the fun."

"None of that kind of fun for me, thank you."

"Don't like to watch it, eh? Well, it ain't so overly nice. But it's got to be done." They rode away after the others.

A strange, creepy feeling took possession of me as we sat in our saddles and watched the eighty vigilants gather around their lone, helpless prisoner, under the big pecan tree. To me it seemed a horrible thing that they were about to do. All of Hart's faults, and they were many, were forgotten now, and all his better traits rose up before me to plead for his life.

Most of the time I looked in some other direction, barely glancing toward the mob now and then to see if they had begun the execution.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE VIGILANTS' COURT.

BUT we soon discovered that the vigilants did not intend to proceed hastily. There were men in the crowd with some sense of responsibility, and these were insisting that the prisoner be given a trial. The two fellows who had felt Hart's six-shooter against their breasts, and some others like them, were impatient of all delay, and kept demanding that the lynching proceed at once.

But the more cautious element prevailed, and a formal trial was decided upon. Only the semblance of a trial the prisoner would have, with the result known in advance. But perhaps it would be better than none at all.

Having overheard this decision, we now rode down to where the vigilants were getting ready to hold court. Some of the party had hitched their horses to bushes and trees round about, and others had turned theirs loose to graze. We dismounted at the outer edge of the crowd and stood holding ours.

Most of the men had seated themselves on the ground, in a big circle. The prisoner, with his hands still tied behind him, was standing in the center, as silent and as motionless as a statue. He either had marvelous self-control, or was half-stupefied by the fate awaiting him. Directly over his head, and ten or fifteen feet above, was a big, horizontal limb; and various members of the crowd kept glancing up at it significantly.

Now a stalwart, flaxen-haired man, with a reddish beard, who seemed to be a leader among the vigilants, stepped in front of Hart.

"Prisoner under the limb," he began. A smile and a ripple of laughter ran round the stern-faced circle at this change in the common court-of-law phrase. And the big man's eyes twinkled, as if he had made a good joke. "Prisoner under the limb," he repeated, "you're accused of drivin' off other men's cattle. Do you plead guilty or not guilty?"

"Not guilty," answered Hart, in quiet but very positive tones.

"Prisoner under the limb," the flaxen-haired man went on, "we've heard you say you ain't guilty, but we've still got our doubts—mighty big ones too. You're goin' to have a trial, though, and we give you the privilege of choosin' any man in this here crowd to act as judge. Look around you keerful, and pick your man."

Now the prisoner roused himself. Wonderfully changed he appeared in look and manner from what he had always been. Slowly, very slowly, his eyes traveled around the circle. His action reminded me of nothing so much as of a homeless, ownerless dog, looking a crowd over half timidly for a friendly face. Once I noticed those searching eyes rest upon a gray-haired, gray-bearded man. But they soon traveled on. Nor did they stop again till they had scanned every face in the hostile circle.

Then they returned at once to the old man. After letting them linger there for a few moments, the prisoner inclined his head in that direction.

"I choose him," he said, in scarcely audible tones.

"Mr. Groves, you're the judge of this here honorable court," called out the flaxen-haired leader. "S'posin' you take the bench."

The old man rose slowly, gravely, and walked over to the foot of the tree.

"Men," he said, "you probably don't know that in the state I came from I was long a justice of the peace, and for two years a county judge. So, if we're going to try this man let's give him a real trial and not a sham trial. I won't go through any farce, or any travesty of justice. That must be understood from the start."

"Oh, we'll give 'im a fair trial all right," answered the flaxen-haired man, good-naturedly, a smile on his face.

Some of the outside vigilants now brought in a log and placed it at the foot of the tree, for the judge to sit on. And the old man seated himself, gravely as became a judge. Later another log was brought in for a seat for Hart.

"Prisoner under the limb," said the flaxen-haired leader, "you are now permitted to choose any man in this crowd to act as your lawyer. I don't reckon we've got any shore-nough lawyers here, but most of us has been in court-rooms, as witnesses and on juries, and we know somethin' about how such things is carried on. Let all them that's ever done any kind of public speakin' stand to their feet, so's the prisoner can see who he's got to choose from. Up with you, boys! Don't be bashful."

More than a dozen men stood up, some of their own accord, others after being pushed out by their friends.

The accused man looked them all over carefully, critically, without a word. Then he turned to the flaxen-haired vigilant.

"I choose you," he said, without hesitation.

The stalwart leader started back, as if the prisoner had struck him.

"Well now, I was thinkin' if I had anything to do with this trial at all, I'd be on the other side," he protested. "Fact is, man, I'm prejudiced against you. Ain't no use denyin' that. Better pick out somebody else."

The accused man looked about him again, doubtfully. But the judge spoke up:

"Mr. Judson, according to your own offer to the prisoner, I don't see how you can refuse to act as his lawyer if you are the man he wants. You'll have to lay aside your prejudice."

"Well, if the fellow insists," answered Judson, "I won't go back on what I said. If I take the case, I'll do all I can for 'im. He can count on that. But I'd lots ruther he'd pick out somebody else."

"I'd ruther have you," persisted Hart.

"All right, pardner, you've got me," answered Judson, smiling a puzzled sort of smile. "Now, Judge, guess you'd better name the lawyer for the other side."

Various names were called out, but Groves finally selected a man named Taylor. After studying the faces of the two men, and hearing them speak, I was not long in deciding that Hart had made the wiser choice. When once Judson got to defending the prisoner, his sympathies would go over to him. And he was a leader of men.

"Now, prisoner," said the judge, "you will be permitted to select a jury of twelve men from this crowd, to hear testimony and decide your case. Name your first man."

Hart and Judson whispered together a few moments, then Hart pointed out one of the more serious, cautious-looking members of the party. The man sprang up, walked over and took his place on the judge's right, seating himself on the ground again.

Here Taylor, who was acting as prosecutor, demanded that he be allowed to choose the next juror. But Judson protested; and Judge Groves decided that, inasmuch as everybody present was more or less prejudiced against the accused man, Hart should choose the whole jury.

So the process of selecting the other eleven jurors went on. As fast as chosen they came over and seated themselves on the grass, in a row. Some of them looked a little uncomfortable, as if not relishing the responsibility thrown upon them. But, on the whole, I felt convinced that Hart, advised by Judson, had chosen the twelve men most likely to bring in a just verdict.

"Gentlemen of the jury," said the judge, himself rising, "will all of you please stand, and take off your hats?"

They complied readily, and the judge went on, in his grave voice:

"Gentlemen of the jury, you are now about to try this man—this accused man—for his life. Please hold up your right hands. Do you, each and all, solemnly swear to lay aside all prejudice, and to try this case by the facts and the evidence, and to decide accordingly? And do you swear that if there is any reasonable doubt of the prisoner's guilt, you will give him the benefit of that doubt and acquit him? And do you swear to deal with this man in all things as you hope to be dealt with when you shall stand before the Judge of all the earth?"

The old man had spoken slowly, solemnly, impressively. After he had ceased, the hush that had fallen upon the mob continued.

"Jedge, ain't you puttin' that a little too strong?" a juror finally inquired, scratching his head doubtfully.

"No, I think not. Today we are trying this man for his life. Tomorrow, it may be, or very soon at least, we ourselves shall be tried, every one of us, before a Judge who has warned us that with what judgment we judge we ourselves shall be judged. As you deal with this man today, so you shall be dealt with, whether you will or not, in the great day of accounts."

One by one the jurors assented to the oath that the judge had administered. Then they sat down again. But it seemed to me that a different spirit, a stronger sense of responsibility, had taken possession, not only of the jury, but of the whole circle of vigilants.

Now Taylor, the prosecutor, called as the first witness the blustering fellow that Hart had given such a fright. The witness brought out all the facts against Hart, told some things that were not facts, and so colored his testimony that there seemed to be no extenuating circumstances in Hart's favor. And when Judson came to cross-question him the witness denied, loudly and angrily, that he had threatened Hart, or done anything whatever to provoke him except to claim some cattle. On the whole, I could not help feeling that his account of the matter had done Hart no small injustice.

The man who had fled with the blusterer that day was also called as a witness. He told a similar story and colored it with fully as much of his own prejudice.

Now witness after witness came forward. All stated that Hart's party had passed through their country, and about the same time or a little later they had missed cattle and horses. And some of them testified that they had just found their missing cattle in Hart's pens.

In cross-examination Judson made every one admit that he had no knowledge whatever that Hart had stolen the cattle, and no knowledge that Hart had not bought them from somebody.

When the time arrived for the defense to present their side of the case Hart himself rose and moved over in front of the jury to testify in his own behalf. He could not hold up his hand, but insisted upon being sworn, as the other witnesses had been.

First he told of starting in the cattle-raising business, some years before, and of his methods of conducting the business. He stated positively that he possessed a bill of sale for every animal he claimed whether in his pens or on the range. He admitted that some of

them might have been stolen; but he insisted that he himself was not the thief, and had only been imposed upon by thieves.

Judson now offered to fetch the bills of sale and put them in evidence. The prosecutor admitted that there were such papers in existence, but sneered at them as being manufactured for the purpose.

After Hart's testimony had been concluded, the judge looked at him and inquired:

"Prisoner, have you any other witnesses that you want called?"

Hart turned, then turned back. "Most of the men that could tell you that what I've said is true are not here now," he answered. "Three of them was out there at the pens when you men rode up, but I guess they stampeded and took to the brush."

"Because they're guilty, and know you're guilty," spoke up the prosecutor. "Innocent men don't sneak off and hide."

Hart made no reply. He now turned and looked appealingly at Newt. But Newt was gazing in another direction, and either failed or refused to see him. Hart evidently took this as a refusal to testify willingly. And knowing Newt's evidence in Judge Wheeler's court, the ranchman was afraid to have him called unwillingly, lest his testimony should do more harm than good.

Then he looked at me, and also at Frank, in mute appeal for help. Neither of us made any response at the moment, and I saw despair settle on the prisoner's face as he turned away. Nobody realized better than Hart how weak his defense was.

"I cain't find any more witnesses," he said, his voice so low that we could scarcely hear him. It was the tone of despair.

"Travis, this won't do," whispered Frank to me.

"Of course it won't," I answered. "Let's talk to Newt."

And talk to him we did, speaking in cautious tones. Newt, I had already learned, was rather vengeful; and I had a suspicion that he remembered Hart's recent threat to use a whip over him. But I soon discovered that, just now, he was more frightened than obstinate. Indeed, so badly frightened was he that his hands were trembling.

"Do you think I'm goin' to let it out that I was with Hart a whole year, and get that mob after me? Not bad I won't. It wouldn't help Hart, and it would be just shore to drag me into trouble with 'im."

Frank and I insisted that there was no serious danger, and tried to argue with him, but he refused even to listen to us. The judge was saying aloud:

"If any person present knows anything whatever in the prisoner's favor I charge him to speak, and to speak now."

"I know I've got a rope ready and waitin'!" an impatient vigilant called out, from the outer side of the circle.

Several men laughed, but the judge commanded "silence!" very sternly, then added:

"If nobody knows anything in the prisoner's favor—"

"Hold on there, please!" Frank called out. "Two more witnesses here yet!"

All eyes were turned toward us. Newt, in no little fear and agitation, whispered:

"Why didn't you keep still? You won't do Hart a bit of good, and you may get yourselves hung on the same limb with 'im. Whatever you do, don't mention me."

I had scarcely thought of such danger to myself before. But it must be confessed that Newt's warning did not tend to reassure me as I handed my bridle-rein to Frank and walked forward to give my testimony in the vigilants' court.

"Tell them the whole story, like you did Judge Wheeler, and they'll

believe you—never fear about that,” was Frank’s parting admonition, given in low tones.

The grim, armed circle opened itself slightly to let me in. After being sworn by the gray-haired judge I stood on his left, so as to face the jury, the men acting as attorneys, and the larger part of the crowd.

“Now tell us what you know about this man Hart,” said Judson.

“And make it mighty short,” a voice called out, from the outer edge of the circle. “We’ve got the rope ready, and I don’t see the use of wastin’ any more time.”

“Silence!” ordered the judge, very sternly. “All such remarks as that are out of order.”

And I was glad to notice that the sentiment of the crowd seemed to approve the rebuke. At the same time I felt little doubt that Hart was already doomed, and would soon be dangling from that big limb above his head—unless we who knew him could save him. I resolved to do my best.

But some instinct warned me that it would be unwise, and possibly dangerous, to begin by telling that I had once been in Hart’s employ. At the best it would prejudice the vigilants against my testimony. So, acting upon Frank’s suggestion, I began at the beginning of my story, as I had done before in the court of law. After telling my name, and where I lived, I mentioned that I was here in pursuit of cattle that had first run away from home and then been stolen. Proceeding, I detailed my pursuit of the runaway ox, jumping from point to point till I came to describe the finding of our cattle in the hands of thieves.

“That’s precizely the treatment me and Jim Green got when we found our cattle in this feller’s hands—only worse,” spoke up the blusterer.

“It wasn’t this man Hart that treated us that way,” I answered. “The men that did that are only a few miles up the river from here now. And, as it happens, they still hold our cattle in their drove, and no telling how many other stolen stock. We tried to get ours from them only this morning, and had Winchesters stuck at us this time instead of six-shooters.”

Here there was a general straightening up, and a dozen questions were showered upon me at once. During the confusion that followed, I had time to arrive at one conclusion: that it would be easy to turn the wrath of this mob from Hart to the men with the big drove. And realizing that it is far easier to turn a torrent than to dam it altogether, I decided to do that very thing.

“Let the witness give his testimony in his own way,” called out Judson. “He’ll tell you all about them other men, I guess, when he comes to ’em. We already know somethin’ about ’em. It’ll be their turn next.”

“That’s right. I’ll tell you about the other men, and that very soon.” I lifted my voice to say.

Silence followed, and I went on with my story. When I came to relate how Dugan had turned against us, numerous expressions of indignation were heard.

“That’s just like Dugan,” spoke up somebody.

“And that’s just the way when you depend on officers of the law to do anything for you.” another vigilant declared. “That’s why we’re goin’ to attend to this little business on our own hook.”

“But all sheriff’s are not alike, as we’ve found out since,” I spoke out.

Then I told of discovering the lost trail, and of following it for days, till we had overtaken Hart and his drove. I also described our perplexity and uncertainty, and explained how we came to hire our-

selves to Hart. Now I merely mentioned that we had staid with him three weeks.

"So that's the way the wind blows, is it?" spoke up a burly vigilant with a gruff voice. "You're one of this feller's gang, and as bad as he is. If you're to vouch for him, who's to vouch for you?"

"Yes, who'll vouch for you?" shouted another man. "How do we know all this lost-cattle story you've been stuffin' us with ain't just a yarn of your own spinnin'?"

"Yes, sir, men, that's one of the very chaps that stuck their six-shooters under my nose!" declared the blusterer. "I'd forgot all about 'im, but I recollect 'im well enough now."

Soon a dozen different men, from different part of the circle, were hurling similar things at me. And the hitherto orderly crowd was fast turning to a disorderly mob. I was greatly alarmed. Newt might have been wise when he warned us that we should only run into trouble by standing up for Hart, and might even get ourselves hanged with him.

Looking out to my friends, I could see that they, too, were much frightened. Well I realized now that I was standing on a smouldering volcano, which might burst out from under my feet at any moment. There were sensible, self-controlled men in the mob, but they were far from being in the majority; and there was no certainty that they could control their reckless, headstrong companions. And I was aware that mobs often do things from some mad impulse, for which they themselves are heartily sorry an hour afterwards.

CHAPTER XXX.

TEN PRISONERS UNDER A LIMB.

HAVING been born on the frontier I had learned something of frontiersmen. I knew that with them a little display of fearlessness, or even make-believe fearlessness, will often go further than a long argument. I also realized that something must be done at once. For the tide of sentiment was setting hard against me.

Renfro's six-shooter was hanging at my belt. With my right hand on its handle I faced the hostile, growling mob, and held up my left hand for silence. As soon as I could make myself heard I called out:

"If any man in this crowd thinks I'm not as honest as he is, let him stand up and say so!"

Silence followed. Everybody watched to see what the others were going to do, but nobody accepted my challenge. Soon a murmur ran over the circle, breaking into outspoken approval.

"That's the way to talk to 'em!" exclaimed a vigilant close to me.

"Yes, that's got the right ring to it," laughed the big man with the gruff voice, who had first spoken against me.

"Good for the boy! Cain't skeer him out!" exclaimed another vigilant.

"Go on with your talk! You're all right!" somebody else called out.

My bravado had hit the mark. Much relieved, I turned to the jury again. The judge was calling sternly for order. When order had been restored, I turned back to the crowd.

"If you want any evidence that I'm all right, I might mention that I'm a deputy-sheriff, appointed only a few days ago."

"And I can vouch for the truth of what he says about huntin' for lost cattle," now called out a vigilant from the outer edge of the crowd, as he rose to his feet to speak. "This young fellow and another one—that one out there—staid all night at my house while they was on the hunt. That was a month or so ago. I'd seen this man Hart buy their cattle from another outfit, and it was me that put 'em on Hart's trail. What Holloway says about that is all straight as a square. In fact, if it hadn't been for what them two boys told me a good many of us wouldn't be here now, I guess."

I had not recognized the speaker before; perhaps I had not seen him. But his corroboration of my story was very welcome. If any smouldering embers of hostility had remained, his words extinguished them. From this time on I spoke to a friendly crowd.

Taking up my narrative where it had been broken off I now told of our flight from Hart's camp.

"We were standing by and saw how Hart treated the two men that claimed some of his cattle," I said. "But instead of helping him with it, as that man over there imagined we did, we decided at once to get away from Hart just as soon as we could."

Then I went on with my story. As I proceeded, the prosecutor interrupted me with a question:

"If you believed Hart to be an honest man, why did you steal your cattle out and run 'em off like that?"

This was a hard question to answer, but I held fast to the truth.

"Well, it was something like this. Not one of us had ever believed

that Hart would steal. But there are honesty and honesty—different grades of honesty. A man may be too honest to steal, and yet not honest enough to surrender stolen property that he has paid for, at least without good proof. We didn't have any proof at all except our word. And from what we had seen we didn't believe Mr. Hart would take that for proof. We paid back all that Hart had paid for our three cattle, and then we thought we had a right to take them any way we pleased."

Some surprised or incredulous exclamations followed this statement, but Hart spoke up:

"That's right. They paid back every cent. I found the money next day where they'd put it."

Now I told briefly of our arrest and detention, and of the coming of a witness that would have set us at liberty, but for the fact that the cattle had disappeared before she could identify them.

"So it seems that you're out on bond," remarked the prosecutor.

"That's right. We're out on bond, with the judge of the circuit court, the prosecuting attorney, the sheriff and several other prominent citizens for bondsmen."

Going on with my narrative, I told of following the cattle up here, and of learning that Hart had not only refused to receive them, but had refused to let the two cowboys remain at his ranch unless they first drove the cattle back. Now Judson inquired:

"Did you ever know of Hart stealin' anything whatsoever?"

"I certainly never did," was my unhesitating reply.

"Did his ways of doin' business seem to be straight and up to the mark all the way through?"

"When he was buying cattle they did. I never saw a more cautious man in all his dealings."

"Do you believe that Hart stole, or had anything to do with stealin' a single one of the cattle out there that these men have just claimed?"

"No, I don't. I know he didn't steal some of them; because I saw them bought and paid for. I wrote the bills of sale myself, and saw them signed."

Now I told how we of Renfro's party had found our cattle, and had been "stood off" with Winchesters.

"They've got a thousand head of cattle and a few hundred horses," I said, "and no telling how many stolen animals besides ours."

"And the sooner we get started after 'em the better," spoke up a vigilant. "That's the gang we want, and that's where we'll find the rest of our stolen stock, I guess."

This ended my evidence. Both Judson and Taylor had cross-questioned me as I told my story, and I now passed out to where my friends were waiting.

"I tell you, Travis, you did that thing up just about right," whispered Frank to me. "The way you worked that six-shooter business would make a fellow think you an old hand at fighting—ready to fight the whole outfit at the drop of a hat."

He made his way into the ring, and was soon telling what he knew of Hart. After going over some things that I had testified to, he gave the true story of the two settlers Hart had chased back the road.

"Do you mean to say them two men lied when they testified about that little affair?" demanded the prosecutor.

"No, but I think they were too badly scared at the time to know what really did happen."

This caused a general laugh, and a better feeling seemed to pervade the crowd. In conclusion Frank testified positively that he did not believe Hart had stolen anything or would steal anything.

By this time Newt had regained his courage, and he, too, went in to testify for his recent employer. And testify he did, saying noth-

ing of his former suspicions, but telling a straight story in Hart's favor all the way through.

"If you believed Hart to be right kind, why did you slip off and leave 'im in the dead of night?" demanded Taylor the prosecutor.

"Well, for one thing, Hart had got mad and cussed me, and I didn't want any more to do with 'im. I didn't like a hair of his head, and I don't yet. And then the two boys that had cattle in Hart's drove had made up their minds to run off with 'em, and they needed me to help. But the main reason was that Hart's way of dealin' with men that claimed some of his cattle was likely to stir up trouble—the very trouble that's happenin' this minute. And I didn't want any finger in that kind of a pie, not if I could help myself."

A ripple of laughter ran over the crowd at this frank statement. But it was easy to see that Newt's testimony, covering so long a period, and given in spite of some ill-feeling, had created a favorable impression for Hart.

The judge now called for other witnesses, but no others came forward. He then informed Judson and Taylor that they would be permitted to address the jury. Both availed themselves of the privilege.

Their speeches swarmed with grammatical errors, and were crude in other ways. But, on the whole, they seemed in keeping with the surroundings—a vigilants' court a hundred and fifty miles deep in the wilds. Judson spoke very earnestly:

"When I took holt of this here case, gentlemen of the jury," he began, "I thought I'd just see that all the evidence in the prisoner's favor was brought in, and that nobody didn't tell any lies ag'in' 'im, and then I'd step aside and let matters take their own course. I didn't dream of doin' any speechifyin' today. But before things had slid along so overly fur, I kind of woke up to the fact that this here prisoner is as innocent of stealin' them there cattle as you and me air, boys. I ruther guess you can all see that as plain as I can now; but if you cain't, why, I'm iust goin' to set in and try to make it as plain as the nose on your face."

And so, in his homely way, he proceeded to review the evidence, and to make his crudely worded but strong and logical argument. There was much rough eloquence in it. His speech was far better than the prosecutor's, and I felt that it ought to convince everybody. But just what effect it was having upon the vigilants I could not tell, because most of them had become silent.

When the speaker had finished the judge reminded the jury of their oath, and of the responsibility resting upon them. Then he told them to step aside and make up their verdict.

They rose at once and, passing out of the crowd, walked about a hundred yards to the shade of another tree. After talking together there a few minutes, they came marching back.

"Gentlemen of the jury," said the judge, when the twelve men stood before him again, "have you reached a verdict?"

"We have," answered one of their number.

"What is it?"

A breathless hush fell upon the ring of vigilants as we listened for the reply.

"We find the prisoner not guilty, and order him released."

Silence followed this announcement. But soon the blusterer exploded with wrath. He cursed long and loudly, and threatened to go home. A few others agreed with him, but most of the crowd endorsed the verdict.

"The prisoner is discharged and court is adjourned," announced the judge.

"Adjourned till we ketch the real thieves," called out Judson, as

he whipped out his pocket-knife and severed the piece of rope that bound Hart's hands. "Boys, while we've been killin' time here over an innocent man, the real thieves, the gang on ahead, is gettin' fu'ther and fu'ther away. We're still short a big lot of cattle and horses, you know. I, for one, hain't found anything of mine yet. Let's be ridin'!"

One of the vigilants now returned Hart's six-shooter, and several apologized for the mistake they had been about to make. Hart smiled, and accepted their apologies pleasantly. But he still seemed a little dazed, and stood looking at the marks on his wrists, as if not realizing that it was all over.

Soon the vigilants had mounted and were riding away, on the trail of Edsell's gang. They left their cattle in the pen, but had informed Hart that they would stop for them on their way back. Frank and Newt and I were left alone with Hart.

"Well, boys," said the ranchman, rousing himself, "I didn't think you treated me just right a few days ago, and I was mad as blazes about it. But that's all dead and buried now. You stood by me like men today, when I needed you mighty bad, and I'll not forget—I'll not forget. If the day ever comes when you're in trouble, and Jasper Hart can be of any service to you, just let 'im know, and he'll get to you as quick as he can, if he has to travel half-way around the world. But let's go up to the house and stir up some dinner. Good while past dinner-time now."

We went with him, after unsaddling our horses. In the absence of Sam, the black cook, Hart himself fell to work to prepare dinner. While he was thus busy the rest of us went out to take a look at the ranch. While strolling about, we saw three horsemen coming up the trail from Fort Concho.

"Why it's Sheriff McCracken and his two deputies! Don't you see it is?" exclaimed Frank to me.

"Wonder what they're doing out here," I remarked, as he and I were walking out to the road to intercept them.

"Must be a sheriffs' convention up here somewhere, from the way they're all gathering," laughed Frank.

The horsemen stopped to make inquiries, but failed to recognize us at first. When we mentioned our having rafted them across the Cowhouse they were both surprised and glad to see us, and all shook hands with us.

"Why, I thought you boys lived close around there," said McCracken, after we had explained how we came to be here. "And so you were hunting cattle, and have been on their trail ever since. Well, you are having a long, long hunt of it. But we're having fully as long a hunt for that desperado Edsell."

"Have you been after that fellow all this time?" asked Frank.

"Yes, we have," answered the sheriff. "We ran onto him and another man at dusk the next day after we saw you, and we exchanged a good many shots with them. But they dodged us in the dark, and we've never set eyes on them since. We got off on a false scent, and lost a lot of time before we found out our mistake. Finally, just a few days ago, we learned by the merest chance that Bill had been seen with a big drove of cattle, moving out this way. And we're still trailing that drove."

"And you're only a few miles behind it now," I spoke up. "But if you wanted to find Edsell, you should have staid with us. We've run onto him three times since we rafted him across the Cowhouse."

"Three times! And we've been scouring the whole state for him, and couldn't get a glimpse of him. How did you happen to run across him?"

We told him, briefly, the whole story of our experiences since that day on the Cowhouse, ending with our being defied by Edsell's gang of desperadoes only a few hours before, and with our still more recent experience in the vigilants' court.

"Well, you have been having a lively chase of it, boys!" exclaimed the sheriff. "But you won't have to take that long ride to Fort Concho and back, I'm glad to tell you. The soldiers are already on the way. We passed Colonel Davis and a hundred cavalry in camp this morning, just after daylight. I talked with the colonel only a minute or two; but he told me that seventy-five armed settlers had passed the fort, marching up this way, and he thought he'd better follow to see what was going on. He knew there was likely to be trouble."

"And where are they now—the cavalry?" I wanted to know.

"That depends on how fast they're traveling. They may be miles and miles behind us; and they may be almost on our heels. Usually, though, they don't make very fast time, I'm told. But if those vigilants are pushing on after Edsell's gang we've got to push on too. I want to have a hand in capturing that fellow."

And away the three officers clattered, at a lively gait. Frank and I walked back and talked to Newt. We promptly decided to abandon our trip to Fort Concho, and to follow McCracken and the vigilants instead. We went to tell Hart, but he insisted that we wait till after dinner, which would soon be ready. And wait we did.

While we were eating, Sam and the two Mexicans made their appearance at the door of the ranch-house.

"Well, boys, did you find the cattle that got out?" was Hart's greeting.

The three only grinned in a sheepish way. They knew that Hart was poking fun at them. Soon the ranchman added, more seriously:

"It's all right, boys. I don't blame you for huntin' holes. For two or three hours there I'd have forked over everything I had in the world to be off in the brush with you. But it's all over now."

A few hours earlier Hart would have cursed the three hands for a far less serious offense than deserting him. But that long, face-to-face view of death had sobered him wonderfully. All his recklessness seemed to have evaporated.

Not very much later we three had saddled our horses and were ready to ride.

"I'd go with you, boys, if I thought I could do you any good," Hart said to us. "But I doubt if I could. And I've got some cattle that must be branded and turned out to grass the first minute possible. But you must stay all night with me on your way back."

We assured him that we would probably do so, and were soon trotting away. We were eager to learn what was going on up the river.

When a few miles from the ranch we looked toward the northeast, across a long stretch of country, and could make out a troop of horsemen coming over a ridge.

"That must be Renfro and the Rangers," remarked Newt. And Frank and I agreed with him. We thought of waiting for them, but decided to push on.

It was half an hour later when, looking down into a valley of the Concho, we saw a canvas-topped wagon standing by some trees, and a numerous drove of cattle and horses scattered and grazing over the valley. And up from the drove came to my ears the long-familiar tones of a bell.

At one place, at the edge of some woods that fringed the banks of the Concho, we saw numerous saddled horses standing, and a crowd of men assembled under a big tree. Something unusual was

going on there, and we rode over to investigate.

Drawing near, we discovered a scene very familiar to the one witnessed a few hours earlier. The vigilants were holding another court.

But instead of one lone prisoner, as before, there were now ten prisoners, all standing in a row under a limb big enough to support them all. And to make sure that there should be no lack of victims this time, every prisoner had his hands tied behind him and a rope around his neck. The ropes were already passed over the big limb, and several men stood holding each of them, ready and eager to execute the court's anticipated sentence.

As we rode up to the crowd, I noticed that different men were managing this trial, the reckless, irresponsible element of the mob being in full control now. But in spite of this they were hearing both sides; or, at least, they were going through the form of doing so.

"Here comes some boys that can tell us all we want to know about the doin's of these chaps," called out a vigilant, as we reined up at the edge of the crowd.

And I was promptly made to dismount, and pushed into the middle of the circle to witness against the already condemned men.

Most of the ten prisoners were pale and cringing, and some seemed scarcely able to stand. But one of their number stood erect, glaring around him, his nostrils dilating with defiance. It was Bill Edsell.

While looking the prisoners over I was greatly relieved to see that Ben Dankens and Ame Watson were not among them. Those two cowboys, it afterwards appeared, had taken alarm, probably at the kind of crowd they found themselves among, and they had got away just in time. We never heard of them again.

As briefly as possible I described our two important encounters with Edsell and others of the prisoners: once in the settlements, where they had shown us their six-shooters, and once only a few miles back, where they had stood us off with Winchesters.

After finishing what I had to tell, I slipped out of the circle and stood with Frank and Newt.

"Bound to be some neck-stretchin' this time," whispered Newt to me.

"No doubt about that," I replied. "Those fellows deserve all they're going to get, I guess; but I can't help feeling sorry for them. It must be an awful, awful situation. Wish we could stop the thing somehow."

"So do I," said Frank. "But I don't see how it can be done."

We stood silent, watching the proceedings as well as we could. Nearly everybody was on his feet now, and it was not easy to see. Gradually a strange feeling of horror took possession of me as I foresaw, in my imagination, all those ten men dangling from that big limb.

Catching sight of Sheriff McCracken standing quietly at the outer edge of the mob, I moved round to where he was.

"I overtook this crowd, and planned the capture," he told me. "We surrounded the whole gang and made them prisoners without firing a shot. But when I wanted them to take the prisoners back to the settlements, or let me take them, they pushed me aside and took matters into their own hands. They won't even let me have anything to do with the trial. They've set their bull-heads to hang the whole ten, and nothing on earth can stop them. I may try to argue them out of it later, but it will only be breath wasted. They won't listen to me. I even told them that I wanted to take Edsell

home and hang him myself, lawfully. But they insist upon saving me that trouble."

Here I whispered, very cautiously, that we had caught sight of Renfro on our way; and I suggested that I might slip off, ride back, and try to hurry them.

He fell in with the suggestion eagerly, and urged me to go, promising to do everything he could to delay the execution, so as to give me time to get the Rangers here.

I now moved back to Frank and Newt to let them know what I proposed to do. They had not yet been called in to testify, and promised that when they were called they would prolong their testimony as much as possible.

Soon I turned and started slowly down the valley. I was leading Dick, my pony, and Vic was trotting ahead of me.

"Hey there, young feller! Whur you goin'?" a man called after me. "Why don't you wait a few minutes? Somethin's goin' to happen around here."

"None of that for me, if you please," I called back, without stopping.

"You can testify ag'inst 'em, but you're too chicken-hearted to watch the rope-business, eh?" remarked the vigilant, as he turned to his companions again.

He was right. One of the things that had already occurred to me was that, if I did not get the Rangers here in time, I should at least escape witnessing the horrible spectacle.

To guard against suspicion, I walked at a leisurely gait, sometimes even pausing to look back, till I came to where the valley was overgrown with mesquites. But scarcely was I out of sight among those, when I sprang into the saddle and started. For a few hundred yards I could not ride fast, having to pick my way. But once back in the trail we had come I urged Dick to a run.

CHAPTER XXXI.

RANGERS, SOLDIERS AND VIGILANTS.

AS I clattered along the hoof-beaten, sun-parched trail, leaving a little fog of dust behind me, I found myself wondering again and again if I should be in time to save the cattle-thieves from the vengeance of the mob. At any rate I would do my best.

I had ridden two miles, or two and a half, when I looked north and discovered a party of horsemen, just coming up the river-bank. They were Rangers. I left the trail and hurried to meet them. The troop numbered between fifty and sixty, and Renfro and his deputy were with them.

On meeting me they all reined up, and Renfro inquired eagerly how I came to be here instead of on my way to Fort Concho.

"We learned that the soldiers were coming, and we turned back," I explained, hastily. "Bill Edsell and his whole gange have been captured by a great mob of settlers, and there'll soon be a whole-sale lynching if you don't get there to stop it."

The captain of the Rangers, who was riding by the sheriff, now exchanged a few hasty words with him, and asked a few questions of me, then shouted his orders. And scarcely were the words out of his mouth when the whole troop were riding at a gallop.

I had ridden hard, and having accomplished my purpose was expecting to return at an easy gait. But Dick, catching the spirit of the other horses, was so eager to go with the crowd that I loosened his bridle-rein, and away we all went together.

Just as we reached the trail, I noticed some of the Rangers pointing toward Hart's ranch. Looking, I saw a troop of blue-coated cavalry emerging from the brush, but a few hundred yards behind us.

Surmising from the Rangers' speed that there must be some urgency, the cavalry broke into a trot, and then into a gallop. Faster and faster they came; and, their horses being fresher than ours, they were soon at our heels.

"Do you think McCracken will be able to stave off the lynching till we come?" Renfro inquired of me, as we clattered along not far apart.

"Hard telling," I answered. "He'll do his best. But if the trial is finished before we get there, it won't surprise me to see all ten of the prisoners dangling from that big pecan limb."

Amid the pounding of hoofs we could scarcely make ourselves heard, and nothing more was said. On we clattered, soldiers and Rangers and officers, more than a hundred and fifty strong. Behind us a cloud of dust rose high in the air. And ahead of all ran little Vic, with her tongue out, but keeping the lead easily. Sometimes she looked back to see why we did not come faster.

A few minutes later those of us in the lead reached the top of a slope and looked down into the Concho valley. At the far edge of the valley the vigilants were still grouped together, but their court had broken up. When first I caught sight of the big pecan, the dangling figure of a man was rising in the air under it, his neck in a noose. Several of the mob could be seen pulling at the rope.

Then we saw a short man—it was Sheriff McCracken—striking at the rope with a knife as high as he could reach. Several vigilants seized him and dragged him back. But after the dangling prisoner had been pulled at least ten feet above the ground, the little sheriff again slashed at the rope till it parted, allowing the victim to drop. A fierce, wild shout went up from the mob.

Down the slope we plunged and across the valley we thundered. The mob, frightened by the little army charging down upon them, at once abandoned their purpose to execute the prisoners.

"It's the Rangers! The jig's up now!" a vigilant shouted, as we dashed up to the crowd and drew rein.

"And there comes the soldiers, too! What did we wait so long for?" somebody else called out.

"I told you we'd better hang 'em first and try 'em afterwards!" yelled the well-known voice of the blusterer, half angrily, half triumphantly.

Nine of the prisoners stood unharmed; but every one was as pale as a ghost. The man we had seen jerked up to the limb lay on the ground, motionless. McCracken was bending over him, loosening the rope that encircled and cut into his neck.

Sheriff Renfro and the Ranger captain dismounted, and so did I. But both the Rangers and the soldiers sat in their saddles awaiting orders.

"Is he dead?" inquired Renfro, as he made his way to where McCracken was working over the fallen cattle-thief. "Why, it's Bill Edsell, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's Edsell. No, I don't think he's hurt very seriously. It doesn't matter, though, if he is. He brought it all on himself. They were trying him, and while somebody was giving evidence against him he suddenly began to curse the witness. Then they jerked him into the air. He wouldn't have received a scratch if he'd kept his mouth shut. As it was, you men didn't get here a minute too soon. I'd heard you coming, or I wouldn't have dared to cut him down."

The captain of the Rangers inspected the prisoners closely, and announced that they were all desperate characters, wanted in various places for various crimes. The ropes were now taken off their necks, and their hands untied. But all were hand-cuffed, and a guard of Rangers was placed over them.

Repeated attempts had been made to revive Edsell, but he still lay motionless. It was now believed that his neck had been injured, and that he must be seriously if not fatally hurt. He was carried over and placed on some blankets in the shade, under the same tree where the other prisoners were being guarded.

The Rangers now dismounted and went into camp here. The cavalry from the fort rode up the valley and camped about three-quarters of a mile above.

For a while some of the vigilants seemed disappointed and sullen. But they had found large numbers of their stolen cattle and horses in the big drove, and were soon in a good humor again. They forded the Concho and went into camp on the other side.

Sheriff Renfro and Sheriff McCracken held a consultation, with the result that our two parties camped together on the river-bank, a few hundred yards above the Rangers. We had all been riding hard, and it was important that our horses should have rest and grass.

Before unsaddling, Frank and I rode out into the scattered herd to see if our long-sought cattle were safe at last. We found all three of them there, and returned to camp well satisfied. On the way back something occurred to me, and I looked at Frank.

"Where's Dugan?" I demanded.

"Sure enough, where's Dugan—our noble Sheriff Dugan? He's certainly not here. Where can all four of them be?"

Unable to explain their disappearance, we afterwards mentioned the matter to McCracken and Renfro. The sheriffs were as much puzzled as we were. The most probable explanation seemed to be that Dugan's party had encountered the desperadoes and been driven back, and had started for the settlements. They had not followed the trail or we should have seen them. Why they had not was more than we could even guess.

Provisions were scarce in all of our camps. But some of the vigilants came over and killed a beef, a fat two-year-old steer, and from them we bought what we needed.

The vigilants had laid claim to nearly half the cattle in the drove, and to more than half the horses. After a consultation between the captain of the Rangers and Sheriffs McCracken and Renfro, it was decided that, as nearly all the stock must have been stolen, they should all be driven back to the settlements, where people who had lost cattle and horses could come and claim them. So all the animals were left in the same drove, and some of the vigilants, a deputy-sheriff and a Ranger or two mounted guard over them.

After cooking and eating our dinner, and resting awhile, our whole party spent an hour or two in the water. The weather was warm, and there was much swimming in the Concho that afternoon. With the exception of the prisoners scarcely a man in any of our four camps failed to take a plunge into the river.

After coming out of the water Frank and I dressed, then shouldered our rifles and started off down the valley in quest of game. When only a hundred yards or so from the Rangers' camp we heard shouting down there, and saw a man running as if for his life, with three or four Rangers after him.

The fugitive was making for some brush, and seemed likely to get there before being overtaken. But presently the pursuers stopped and threw up their guns, and one of the shouted:

"Halt there! Halt, or we'll shoot!"

The fleeing man did not stop; but, turning as he ran, he fired a hasty shot at the party behind him. Then the Rangers' rifles roared out, the reports echoing from the hills loudly. And almost at the same instant the fugitive dropped to the ground.

"One of the prisoners has got away!" I cried.

"And they've shot him!" exclaimed Frank as, with one accord, we started toward the fallen man. Several other Rangers were now running, every one with a gun in his hand.

There was a ring of riflemen surrounding the prostrate prisoner when we came to where he lay. To our no small surprise he proved to be Bill Edsell.

The desperado had been "playing 'possum," as one of the Rangers expressed it. He had lain as if half-dead, till his guards got a few yards from him, and turned their backs. Then he sprang up, seized a Winchester leaning against a tree, and started for the mesquites. Once among those, he would have stood a good chance to escape. And he would certainly have reached them if the Rangers' bullets had not stopped him.

Edsell was lying on the ground, not dead, but bleeding from several wounds. He was taken up and carried back to the Rangers' camp, both Frank and I helping. There we laid him on some blankets at the foot of a tree, and made him as comfortable as possible. The Ranger captain now began to examine Bill's wounds.

The wounded outlaw was perhaps thirty-five years old. His face, while far from being a good one, was by no means of the villainous type. Just now he was very pale, and his eyes kept wandering from

one of us to another, with a look that haunted me long afterwards. The sun was near to setting; and it was easy to see that the sun of his life was also near its setting.

It was a strange scene—that scene out there in the wilds—one that I shall never forget. The wounded, bleeding man lay quietly on his rude bed, while around him stood those grim riflemen who had brought him down, leaning on their guns in silence. The Ranger captain, who seemed to know something of surgery, was kneeling by the wounded man, trying in vain to check the flow of blood.

“Edsell,” he said, “I must tell you the truth. You have only a short time to live. Is there anything we can do for you? If there is, speak out; we’ll do it gladly.”

The desperado shook his head, slowly. “Nothing—nothing at all, captain. But I thank you,” he replied, very quietly, almost gently.

“Why didn’t you stop man? Didn’t you know they’d have to kill you?”

“It was this or a rope, and I preferred—this,” was the answer. All the desperado seemed gone from the man.

“Have you no friends or relatives, Bill?”

“I have many relatives, and used to have plenty of friends, captain. But they all think me dead. And they’ll soon think right.”

“But have you no last word to send to them, Bill?”

The dying desperado shook his head. “No word. I don’t want them to know. My real name is neither Bill nor Edsell. That’s a name I chose to hide myself under when I started on the road—to this. No matter what my real name is—or was. That’s my secret.”

For several minutes there was utter silence. Nobody spoke or moved. What the dying outlaw’s thoughts were—who can tell? They must have been busy with the past. At length he spoke:

“Captain, is there anything sadder—can there be anything sadder than a wasted life?”

“No, I guess not, Bill—I guess not.”

Another silence followed, and at length the dying man spoke again:

“Who could have foretold, when I was a little boy, that I should end up away out here, and like this—like this—like this?”

The last words were little more than whispered, as if spoken to himself. He closed his eyes for a few moments, but opened them to say:

“If we could only call back. If we could only undo.”

Now he seemed to fall asleep. His face, pale at first, had begun to flush with fever. Soon he was talking in his sleep, or delirium. Perhaps it was both.

Strange words were those that fell from the lips of this man of crime. In his dying delirium he was a child again. Even his tones seemed softened.

“Mother, please let us go. All the other boys are going. Won’t you let us go, too? Yes, we’ll be good boys. We won’t go in where the water’s deep. Good-bye, mother! We’ll not stay long. Come on, boys! She says we may go. Here, Carlo! Here, Carlo! Come along, doggy! Carlo likes to swim as well as any of us!”

And so he prattled on—prattled on, for several minutes. It was not always the same. Sometimes he seemed to be in school, or at other times on the play-ground, or on his way to or from school. At last he said:

“Boys, I don’t feel very well. Something’s the matter with my head. Let’s sit down here in the shade a little while, and maybe I’ll—feel—better.”

Those were his last words. A little later the Ranger captain, who had been holding Edsell’s wrist, rose to his feet in the dusk and

said, in husky tones, his eyes swimming with tears:

"Well, he's gone. Boys, I've seen a good many of his kind die. Some die praying, and some die cursing, and some die with words on their lips you wish you could forget. But I never saw one die like that before. Wicked as the fellow was, there must have been some good in him. Pity it couldn't have been got out."

We dug the desperado's grave under a spreading-topped pecan—dug it that night, by the light of a smoky lantern found in the covered wagon. Next morning, between daybreak and sunrise, all the men in our various camps assembled, and what was mortal of him that had been called Bill Edsell was wrapped in his blanket and lowered into the shallow grave.

Just as some one was about to commence shoveling in earth, Sheriff Renfro motioned him to wait, and stepped to the grave-side.

"Men," he said, "it seems that at least a few words ought to be spoken. I don't know anything good to say of this man, so I'm going to say nothing. Silence is kinder than words. But there must have been some good in him. God knows. And God knows, too, why he went wrong. There's just one word more that I want to add; and that is to repeat what he himself said: ('Is there anything sadder—can there be anything sadder than a wasted life?')

A few minutes later the grave was filled. And an hour later all of our parties, vigilants, cavalry and Rangers—nearly two hundred and sixty men—with the covered wagon, and twelve or thirteen hundred head of cattle and horses, were marching toward Fort Concho.

*I am
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CHAPTER XXXII.

THE MARCH TO THE SETTLEMENTS.

WHILE our lengthy cavalcade was filing by Hart's ranch, those of the vigilants who had cattle there turned aside and took them out of his pens. Hart surrendered them without a word of protest, and even helped to cut them out.

The procession moved on, but Newt and Frank and I remained. Hart treated us very cordially, and it was with no little regret that we had to decline his urgent invitation to stay with him a few days.

He counted out to Frank and me every cent we had paid him for our cattle, and then all the money still due us for cattle-driving. He also handed us a letter he had written to Judge Wheeler.

"But you paid for our cattle," objected Frank.

"What if I did? That's my lookout, not yours. Jasper Hart don't ask you or anybody else to stand between him and his blunders. You boys did me good, honest work, and you're well entitled to your pay. When I stopped you yesterday mornin', I was goin' to hand you this money, and then give you a good cussin' to boot for stealin' off in the dark like you did. But cussin's don't go any more. And after hearin' you tell why you done it, I cain't say as I blame you much. Guess I'd have done about the same thing in your place. You made a mistake, though, in thinkin' I'd have treated you boys like I treated the two spitfires that run onto us that day. Of course if you'd acted like they did, you might have got the same kind of a send-off. But—"

"But if we had gone to you and told you the straight of the matter, what would you have done?" I wanted to know.

He looked thoughtful. "Well, I might have been a little out of sorts about it. In fact, ruther guess I'd have got purty hot under the collar. And I might have said things I oughn't to have said. That's one of my failin's, or has been."

"But you would have believed us?" I asked.

"Yes, I would. Why shouldn't I? You'd never lied to me, or played any sharp tricks on me. I know I would; because when I got back to camp and found your letter, I didn't doubt a word of it. I might have flared up and ripped and cussed around a little, because I'd been taken in. But after it was all over you'd have got your cattle, and that without payin' a cent for 'em. No doubt about that."

"Then I'm heartily sorry we didn't tell you, as we had all the time intended to," I assured him.

"So am I," spoke up Frank. "We felt mean over sneaking off—over having to sneak off like we did. And it would have saved us a world of trouble and worry in the long run."

"Well, let's drop that, boys," said the ranchman. "It's all past and gone. And a fellow that makes as many blunders as I do would be mightily out of place findin' fault with you boys for makin' a little one once in a while."

We remained at the ranch an hour or more. Then Hart saddled his horse and rode with us a few miles. When the time came for him to turn back, we all stopped.

"Well, boys," he said, addressing Frank and me, "I'm glad you've got your cattle at last. You've certainly had a long hunt. Hope

you'll get home with 'em all safe and sound. If you ever want a job at cowboyin', any of you, come out to the ranch here and you shall have it. Maybe you'll find me a better man to work for, and a little better man all around. I hain't been what I ought to have been. I own up to that. I hain't never stole anything. You told the truth there. And I've never bought anything that I knowed for certain was stole. But a good many times I've shut my eyes to keep from seein'. It won't be so hereafter, though, if I know myself.

"Somehow I've always been pushed into a hard crowd. When I was a boy, I never had any parents that I could remember, nor any home nor bringin' up nor schoolin'. I was grown before I could read my own name in print, much less write it. What little readin' and writin' and cipherin' I can do I picked up myself. And mighty hard pickin' I found it. Maybe if I'd had the chance that other boys have, I'd have been a half-way decent sort of man. Anyhow, I've always wanted to be. I've always been with such a hard crowd, it seemed like I just had to use some of their devilish ways to keep 'em from doin' me up. But if I'd been the right sort, maybe I'd have hunted up a better crowd. Every boy that's got a home ought to stay in it just as long as he can."

He remained thoughtfully silent for a few moments, then went on:

"That was a close call I had yesterday, and it made me feel mighty solemn. And I feel solemn yet. I don't mind tellin' you, boys, that Jasper Hart's goin' to toe the chalk-line a long sight closer hereafter than he has been doin'.

"And there's another thing. Until now I've always stuck to my friends and made it hot for my enemies. But the way you boys stood by me yesterday, just after I'd started in to tell you what I thought of you—that has kind of set me to thinkin' that maybe, after all, that way is a long jump ahead of mine. So I've made up my mind that hereafter I'll stick to my friends as close as I ever did, but I won't bother to get even with my enemies. In fact, if I find one of 'em in a pinch, don't know but what I'll give 'im a little friendly pull, just to see how it makes 'im feel, and how it makes me feel."

After we had talked with him a few minutes longer, he gathered up his reins and shook hands with us.

"Well, good-bye, boys! Good luck to you all! If you ever get into trouble, come straight to Jasper Hart if you can. And if you cain't, let 'im know, and he'll come to you."

He wheeled his horse, waved his hand to us, and galloped away back the road. I have never seen him since.

With all his faults, I have only the kindest recollections of the impulsive, fiery ranchman. Undoubtedly he was honest according to his lights. And though his lights were rather dim, he was groping his way toward better things. Let us hope that he found them.

We three rode on our way. We had traveled a mile or two further, and were passing through a brushy country, when we caught a glimpse of some strange-looking objects in the road ahead of us.

Wondering what they could be, we all broke into a gallop. But when we came to where the objects had been, they had vanished. While puzzling over the mystery, we heard somebody calling to us from the brush. We reined up suddenly, and four men came partly, bashfully into view among the bushes. And, to our amazement, they were all utterly naked!

At first we sat staring at them. Soon we recognized them as Sheriff Dugan and his three deputies.

"What have you done with your clothes?" called out Frank, laughingly. "Did you go in swimming and get them stolen?"

"No, we didn't," growled Dugan. Later he came closer and ex-

plained. "We'd come upon one of that desperado gang, and had arrested him and handcuffed him hard and fast, when the whole gang surrounded us and got the drop on us. First they disarmed us, and then made us dismount. After that they marched us off two or three miles across the prairie and through the brush. We thought they must be going to kill us. But at last they made us strip off everything, and then they told us to skedaddle. And about the time we started they began to shoot the ground full of holes around our feet. We felt lucky to escape with our lives. We started for that ranch; but there are so many prickly pears and mesquite thorns and such like, and we're so tender-footed, it takes us forever to get anywhere. We didn't strike the trail till a few minutes ago."

"You couldn't find that ranch by traveling this direction," said I. "You've already passed it."

"Seems to me I've seen you boys somewhere before," Dugan was now looking straight at me.

"Of course you have," was my answer. I was scarcely able to keep from laughing at the odd figures made by these nude officers of the law. And then Frank and I explained when and under what circumstances they had seen us.

"That was a big mistake I made that day," Dugan admitted, gloomily.

"Well, yes, I guess it was—I rather guess it was," answered Frank. "But things have about evened up, after all. The men you refused to arrest that day were some of the same gang that played this joke on you."

"I never did believe that cattle-buyin' outfit was as innocent as they pretended to be," growled a naked deputy-sheriff, who was trying to pick a piece of mesquite thorn out of his foot.

"Didn't have a very comfortable sleep last night, I guess," remarked Newt.

"No, we didn't," grumbled another deputy. "We bedded up like pigs in some high grass; but we nearly froze along toward day."

After discussing the situation with the four officers, we let them have our slickers and one blanket to protect them from the sun; and then we rode on to overtake our party and bring back some horses, and their clothes if we could find them.

We rode rapidly, but it was a good while later when we came up with the long, slow-moving procession. We found the four saddles in the wagon. The horses belonging to Dugan's party were in the drove, but we did not know them, and we caught others instead.

But not one piece of the nude party's wearing apparel was to be found. As a last resort, we got permission from the Ranger captain to question his prisoners. The prisoners grinned, but for some reason declined to give any information, except to say the owners of those clothes would never see them again. The clothes must have been hidden somewhere, or perhaps destroyed.

Frank and I rode back, leading four saddled horses, until we met the four men. And a comical picture they made as they came hobbling along the road, the deputies, arrayed in our slickers, and Dugan himself with the blanket wrapped around him. Very glad indeed were they to be mounted again.

Though the four certainly made ludicrous figures on horseback, Frank and I refrained from laughing as far as possible. But when we overtook the rest of our party, they were less considerate. The hailstorm of jokes and gibes and jeers that suddenly broke upon the four officers was something frightful. In fact, the ridicule and laughter were so uproarious that I felt half-sorry for them, and was rather glad when they dropped to the rear to escape.

About noon our cavalcade halted for dinner. We remained in camp an hour or two, then took up our line of march again.

The Rangers, who wore no uniforms, led the way, and the blue-coated cavalry rode next. And after these tramped the long-strung-out drove of cattle and horses. The vigilants brought up the rear, pushing along the drove. Both the Rangers and the soldiers could have outmarched the cattle, doubtless; but they had been riding hard, and did not care to do so. And possibly they preferred to remain near enough to keep an eye on that big troop of armed vigilants.

During the afternoon Frank and I helped to drive the cattle for an hour or two. Afterwards we rode with one of the vigilants—the one whom we had spent a night with, and who had put us on Hart's trail. In the course of the conversation he said:

"I was thinkin' of somethin' today. Seein' that big, spotted steer of yours over there, and hearin' his bell, reminded me of it. Seems mighty strange, don't it, that that old fellow should have stirred up this whole rumpus? All these two hundred and fifty or sixty armed men are here just on that brute's account."

"Well, some of us are," I answered. "If Lep hadn't run away from home, Frank Booth and I wouldn't have been here, and Mr. Renfro wouldn't have been here. And if he hadn't gone after the Rangers, they wouldn't have been here."

"That's right. And if you boys hadn't spent that night at my house, none of us settlers would have made this trip out here. And if we hadn't come, the soldiers wouldn't—couldn't have followed us. And without us or the soldiers or the Rangers, the cattle-thieves couldn't have been captured, and they'd have been drivin' all these cattle and horses further out into the wild country."

"How did our spending the night at your house have anything to do with bringing all you settlers out here?" I wanted to know.

"Why, you boys told me how Dugan had treated you, and that stirred me up; and I talked it around to all my neighbors, and got them stirred up. They kept talkin' it around till the same gang of cattle-thieves passed through on their way west—passed on the other side of the county. And about the time they passed, or a little later, cattle and horses began to disappear between days. Then a lot of us got together at our school-house and denounced Dugan for his slowness. That was what started him out."

"That explains it," laughed Frank. "I knew there was something."

"Yes, he never would have moved without it. But by that time we'd got so worked up over the matter that all that had lost cattle and horses, and some that hadn't, banded together and struck out after the thieves. A good many turned back after a few days, but some of us didn't. As we followed the trail, other men that had lost cattle and horses kept fallin' in with us, till we got to be upwards of eighty strong. Most of us come from the other side of the river; but there's some from this side. If there hadn't been a big bunch of us, we never would have followed the thieves away out here."

"So, you see, it's just as I said at first. Your runaway steer is at the bottom of this whole thing. Strange, too."

"Well, it's a pretty big dust for one old, hard-necked plow-ox to kick up," I answered, curiously. For just at this time we were passing over a ridge. Being at the rearmost end of the line, we could look down upon our whole marching cavalcade, stretching out for a mile and a half. And a striking picture it made.

An hour or two before sunset our big company camped for the night. After unsaddling our horses and lariatting them out, Frank and I shouldered our rifles and went hunting. Frank flagged an antelope, and I brought it down with a bullet. We returned to camp

carrying the game between us. A number of other hunters had gone out, and other game was brought in. Another beef had also been killed, and nobody went to bed hungry that night.

Some of the Rangers were shooting at a target when we returned, and I strolled over to watch them. They invited me to try my rifle, and were as much surprised as was I myself when I succeeded in placing a bullet so near the mark that there were only two shots better than mine.

Just before nightfall, having found an unused lariat in the wagon, I went and caught Lep out of the drove, and was leading him over to a place near Renfro's camp, when I heard my named called. Looking, I saw Renfro beckoning to me. He was standing with three other men.

As I approached, I noticed that the group was made up of Sheriff McCracken, Colonel Davis, in command of the United States cavalry, and the captain of the Rangers. Renfro introduced me to the two commanders, and after they had shaken hands with me, very cordially, too, he said:

"Travis, I've just been telling these gentlemen about you and Frank, and your long, adventurous cattle-hunt; and that we're all here, under arms, because this steer ran away from home. Here he is, gentlemen! Here's the long-horned fellow that set this whole expedition on foot."

"Is that literally true, Renfro," inquired the colonel, with a half-amused, half-incredulous look on his face.

"Yes, I've no doubt it is. Don't know for certain that I'd have thought of it myself. But I happened to get into conversation with one of the settlers today—one that the boys staid all night with some time ago—and he was telling me all about it." And Renfro repeated what the man had told him.

"So that fellow took his horns and ran away from home, and now it requires a little army of us to get him back, does it?" observed the Ranger captain, with a smile.

"That's just about the size of it, it seems," McCracken remarked. "He's an astonishing steer, and his history is almost as marvelous as his horns."

For several minutes I stood with the four officers, civil and military, answering their questions. Incidentally I mentioned the contrast between the beginning of my ox-hunt—one bare-headed boy on foot—and its present proportions. They all seemed much interested, and some of them much amused.

Finally I went on, leading Lep, and lariatied him near Dick. I was resolved that he should not escape from me again.

There was an interesting, picturesque scene as darkness settled down upon our camp. Though the day had been warm, the September night was somewhat chilly, and numerous camp-fires were ablaze up and down the valley. And around every camp-fire sat a group of men, talking and laughing, and some of them singing. A jolly, good-natured company were we all—except the nine prisoners and Dugan's party.

The latter were made miserable by the pokes and gibes hurled at them wherever they showed themselves. They had not found any clothes, and were still going about bare-footed, with blankets tied around them. The fact that they had been stripped to the skin by thieves whom they had once refused to arrest had already spread over the whole camp, and robbed them of all sympathy. The vigilants from Dugan's own county were especially sarcastic toward their crest-fallen sheriff.

Neither Frank nor I was disposed to be revengeful. It must be confessed, though, that we rather enjoyed these jokes for a time.

But it seemed to me that the ridicule was kept up too long. The four men finally escaped from it by going apart and establishing a camp by themselves.

Both Frank and I spent an hour on herd duty that night. Next morning we were all awakened by the cavalry bugle; and after breakfast we began our day's march to the same call.

During this our second day Frank and I got acquainted with several soldiers and Rangers, and learned many of their interesting experiences. This was our first opportunity to know people in strange callings, and we made the most of it.

While we were riding by Sheriff McCracken, he inquired how old we were. On being told, he expressed his disappointment.

"If you were only a little older, and were up in my county, I'd appoint you deputy-sheriffs," he told us. "You're just the kind of fellows I need. When I get on the trail of a law-breaker, I want to stay with him like a blood-hound till I get him and I want somebody that will stay with me without grumbling. And you boys are certainly stayers. You've proved that."

Later in the day the captain of the Rangers stopped us while we were passing near him, and also inquired our ages. Then he told us that if we cared for service with his company we could come to him when we were a year or two older, and find a place open.

The tenacity with which we had followed the cattle-trail had appealed to him, he informed us. And he also admitted that my good shot in the target practice of the day before had something to do with his offer. And a few words that he accidentally let drop convinced me that he had heard of my make-believe defiance of the mob, and in consequence had a much-exaggerated opinion of our courage.

We expressed our appreciation of his offer, and assured him that we would not fail to consider the matter when the time came. He related a good number of his most interesting experiences, and drew a pleasing picture of the wild, free life that he and his hard-riding, straight-shooting riflemen were leading. It was easy to see that he was very fond of the life. And he also had something to say of the good that he and his Rangers were doing in suppressing every form of lawlessness.

On the whole, he left both of us very favorably impressed. We afterwards talked not a little of what he had said. But our plans for getting an education stood in the way of our seriously considering the offer.

Still later in the day we happened to be riding near Colonel Davis, when he motioned to us to come over and ride by him. He made numerous inquiries about where we lived, and our parents, and also about our plans in life. On learning that we were both eager to secure an education, he asked why we did not try for West Point.

He himself was a graduate of that famous military academy, and believed that there was no other place equal to it for getting a thorough education. When I objected that I had never supposed I should like a soldier's life, he assured me that it was not necessary for a West Point graduate to become a soldier, except in time of war.

Then he talked for an hour or more, telling us of the life and discipline in the school itself, and later of the opportunities that opened to any one with a military education.

The man himself was so intelligent and so gentlemanly that, by the time he had finished, we were both somewhat enthusiastic over the matter. He advised us to attend some good school for a year or two, and then, if we still thought favorably of what he had suggested, to write him for advice as to how to proceed.

Night found our party within a few miles of Fort Concho. We all went into camp except the cavalry, which pushed on to the fort.

The rest of us arrived at the fort early next morning. While there I saw Colonel Davis again, and again he urged me to keep a West Point education in my plans. I assured him that I would, and promised to write to him before deciding the matter finally.

A few miles east of the fort, all but twelve or fifteen of the Rangers left us. Those that went with us had the prisoners in charge. A little later Sheriff McCracken and his deputies set off toward the northeast, following a branch road.

Very zealous for the enforcement of the law was the valiant little sheriff. His party and ours—Renfro's—rode together during the last few miles, and he talked much on that subject.

"The people of Texas—the people that have made and are making the state what it is—are and always have been law-abiding," he declared. "But some fool set the impression afloat over east and up north that Texas is a place where every man is a law to himself, and a lot of other fools have flocked here under the delusion that they can do just as they please. They've got to be taught better. They've got to be taught that there's only one alternative to submitting to the law, and that is to die. It may cost some of us our lives to teach them that lesson, but they've got it to learn."

Just at this point we came to the forks of the road. Here he and his deputies shook hands with all of us; then they rode away. We were never to see him again.

Brave Sheriff McCracken! Strong arm of the law—one of the strongest arms of the many-armed law! Two years longer he lived to make his name a terror to evil-doers. Then he went down before a desperado's bullet. He was only one of numerous officers who fell as martyrs to law-enforcement during those troubled days.

Sheriff Dugan and his three followers also left us near Fort Concho. They had obtained some worn-out, cast-off uniforms and other nondescript garments at the fort; and, arrayed in these, they pushed ahead to escape the ridicule that had pelted them mercilessly wherever they went. They soon left us behind, and we did not see them again.

Frank and I had already got acquainted with a number of the vigilants; and during the rest of our journey we came to know more of them. Some were reckless, harum-scarum fellows, but others were sensible enough. On the last morning we were with them Judson, the man who had defended Hart, happened to be riding by me.

"It was you that knocked that little business with the cattle-thieves in the head, wasn't it?" he wanted to know.

"Well, I had something to do with it," I admitted. "I rode back for the Rangers. And, as it happened, I brought the soldiers at the same time."

"That's what I guessed, when I saw you gallop up with 'em. Well, I was mad as blazes just about then. Nobody wanted to hang the whole outfit worse than I did, or any higher than I did. And, to tell the truth, I still doubt whether them rascals was worth savin'. One of 'em wasn't, I know. Leastways, it didn't do 'im much good. But now that it's all past and gone, I'm the gladdest kind it fell through like it did. That's a thing a feller can do mighty easy while he's hot, and don't like to think about after he cools off."

At the edge of the settlements our company broke up. A few of the vigilants turned south, but most of them kept on eastward, all driving their recovered cattle and horses. The Rangers also rode south, to deliver their prisoners at various jails, wherever they were most wanted.

We of Renfro's party took the unclaimed cattle and horses, and also the wagon, and drove north.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A TRIUMPHANT HOME-COMING.

A FEW miles from the county-seat of his own county Renfro found a pasture for our good-sized drove of unclaimed cattle and horses, and shut them in till the owners could come and claim them. He expected to advertise the fact that many stolen animals were here. Newt remained near the pasture to look after the drove, but the sheriff rode on home, and Frank and I went out to where Frank's sisters and brother-in-law were visiting.

Next day Stella rode to town with us on horseback. Accompanied by the sheriff and Nannie we went out to the pasture. And there Stella positively identified Lep and the two younger cattle as the ones she had described in her testimony in court.

The sheriff was now authorized to release us from our bonds. But district court was still in session, and in view of the delay he thought it better to take us before Judge Wheeler again, that that stickler for technicalities might discharge us himself.

Besides having Stella's evidence, we had brought with us a letter from Hart to the judge. It stated that while he had once bought the three cattle, and had supposed that he owned them, he now knew that Frank and I were the real owners, and had been at the time we ran them off from his herd.

The judge now stated that the proof of our innocence was as conclusive as it could possibly be, and he formally discharged us before a crowded court-room, with an ample apology for the trouble the mistake had caused us.

When he had concluded the whole court-room applauded, and the judge, instead of reproving the crowd for it, merely gazed out at the window.

We all went to Renfro's for dinner. And a lively time we had talking over our recent experiences. We had already surrendered our arms, and after dinner Renfro paid us for our services as deputy-sheriffs.

This money was very welcome to me. Added to what I had received from Hart, it would enable me to get home with an amount in my pocket equivalent to ordinary wages for all the time I had lost from farm work. Thus my long trip would really cost me nothing.

A little later we shook hands with Newt and wished him good-bye. He was starting on a long journey to eastern Texas, where his father and mother lived.

Having full and undisputed possession of Lep at last, I was now eager to get started homeward. But Frank would not hear to my returning without him. His friends wanted to go back with us, and shortened their stay for that purpose. We waited for them two or three days while resting our horses.

But at last we were on our way home. While passing through the little county-seat, we stopped to take leave of Sheriff Renfro and his family, and some of other friends there. Then we moved on, the spring wagon in the lead, and Frank and I driving our three cattle behind.

For two or three days our little party traveled alone. We camped

wherever night overtook us, setting up a tent for Stella and her sister. The rest of us slept under the spring-wagon, or near it. We did not travel fast, and usually lay by a good while at noon.

One feature of the journey was both pleasant and embarrassing to me. Stella persisted in looking upon me as a sort of hero, and all my protests and denials would not abate her ardor.

"Frank told us all about how you defied the whole mob away out there in the wilderness, and made them back down," she said. "Oh, I just wish I could have seen you!" Her dark eyes were shining.

"Well, I'm glad you didn't," answered I. "You'd have seen me half scared out of my senses."

"No such thing!" she declared, indignantly. "My brother don't tell things that are not so. And he says you were not scared at all, and that you looked mad enough to fight the whole crowd."

"That's because Frank wasn't in my boots. If he had been, he'd have known better."

But the girl calmly ignored all my protests. That was the kind of thing that would appeal to a very young lady of fourteen, and she was determined to believe it.

"Oh, I just know you'll be another Colonel Travis some day," she declared with more disposition to "gush" than I had thought her capable of. "If there's another Alamo you'll be in it."

"Not if I can help myself. Do you want me cut to pieces by Greasers?"

"You know I don't mean that," she answered, more thoughtfully.

Just before camping time, on our first day after crossing the Colorado, we found ourselves passing through an immigrant camp of twenty wagons and more on both sides of the road. And before Frank and I had recognized anybody, we were being hailed from half a dozen camps.

Now we recognized ten or twelve of our former traveling companions, the vigilants. Among these was Judson, the big, flaxen-haired, sandy-bearded man, and old Mr. Groves—Judge Groves they called him now—who had presided at Hart's trial.

Their party, they now informed us, had traveled far, having journeyed all the way from eastern Missouri in their wagons. While in this very camp they had most of their horses stolen; and from here about half of their men had followed the trail, soon joining a much larger force of vigilants. And they had kept following, as we already knew, till they found their stolen teams in the hands of Edsell's gang, a hundred and sixty miles beyond the settlements, and brought them back. Since returning they had remained quietly in camp.

They had expected to form a settlement out here somewhere; but most of them disliked the country, and they were undecided what to do.

Our little party went into camp only a few hundred yards beyond the big one. Our tent was soon set up, and our animals were watered at a near-by creek and lariatied to bushes. I had bought a long rope for the purpose, and Lep was now kept at the end of it every night. Usually I tied him as near the camp as possible. And every time I happened to wake I would rise to my elbow and look for him. And even after that I always looked again in the morning, half expecting to find him gone, so many times had he escaped from me.

After supper our whole party walked back to the other camp. We had been invited to attend a meeting there.

All the travelers had assembled around one big camp-fire, for the purpose of determining, if possible, what they should do. The wo-

men and girls were sitting on chairs and spring seats and boxes, and the men and boys on logs and stumps and the ground.

I dropped down on the grass, by one of the men I had got acquainted with on our way back from the Fort Concho country.

Judge Groves presided. First one person then another got up to speak. There was much rambling talk; for nobody seemed to know what he wanted to do.

When I had first heard the judge's name, that day in the vigilants' court, the night I had spent with Sam Groves, the half-crazy shepherd, came back to me very vividly. But so many exciting events had followed, that I had forgotten all about the matter until now. Tonight, however, there seemed to be some slight, indefinable resemblance between the gray-haired man and the hermit shepherd. I whispered to my neighbor:

"Judge Groves comes from Missouri, does he?"

"No. Most of us come from Missouri, but two or three families fell in with us on the way. Groves is from West Virginia. He got with us just as we was startin'. He'd been travelin' alone before, but he's stuck to us close ever since. Fine old man."

I recalled that the shepherd had told me he was from Virginia. But if he had something to hide he had probably dropped off the first part of the name. At any rate, I resolved to have a talk with the Judge himself. But my informant had not finished:

"Judge Groves has got a son out here somewhere, but he cain't find 'im, or hear a word of 'im, and he's mightily worried about it. Hain't heard from 'im for a year or two, it seems. The old man's pore, like the rest of us, and he's druv all the way from West Virginia, him and his wife and two girls, to find his boy. We come by whur young Groves used to ranch it, but he'd left there about a year before, with his flock of sheep, and started out this way. That's all we could learn about 'im."

"Do you know his son's first name?"

"No. Don't believe I do. Guess I've heard it, but I've forgot."

Now I was fully determined to have a talk with the old man.

My neighbor soon began to question me as to where I lived, and the kind of country. I described it as well as I could, and he said:

"Well now, that's the very country I'm lookin' fur myself. And it might suit all the rest of us, too. We want a timber country, but not a broken country. This is too rough for us. S'pose you stand up and tell 'em what kind of a country you live in."

I objected to this; and soon the man himself stood up and repeated what I had told him. Much interest was quickly aroused, and in response to many calls I got upon my feet and gave some further information. Then I announced that I would answer questions; and for at least half an hour questions rained upon me.

I was already enthusiastic over our new country, with its rich soil and cheap lands, and for various reasons I was eager to have it settled. So I pictured its beauty and fertility and great possibilities in glowing colors—so glowing that I afterwards reproached myself for exaggerating. But time has proved that I was under rather than over the truth.

When the meeting was about to break up, several announced their readiness to start for my promised land next morning. Others were undecided, but nobody was outspoken against it.

After the meeting I found Frank, and told him what I had learned of Judge Groves; and together we approached the old man and had a talk with him. His delight, and the delight of his wife and daughters, was well worth seeing when we informed them where the lost member of their family could be found.

They invited us to their camp, to talk with them about Sam.

But we made an excuse, not caring to tell them all we knew. However, they announced their intention of setting out with us next morning, no matter what the rest of their party did.

But when morning came we found that the whole party had decided to go with us. And the sun was not very high when our lengthy caravan got in motion.

Frank and I now led the way, driving our cattle. The spring-wagon followed us, and twenty-four white-topped wagons were strung out behind the spring-wagon.

The rest of the journey home may be told very briefly. We passed through the mountainous country again, and Frank and I stopped a few minutes at the water-mill, to talk with the miller. The Cowhouse, which had given us so much trouble, was scarcely knee-deep when we crossed it again. And our raft lay high and dry near the south bank. We halted for a few minutes at the house where we had left the wildcat and panther skins; and after talking with the bearded settler there we were not surprised, when passing the haunted cabin, to see a wisp of feather smoke floating upward from its chimney. Somebody had moved in.

As our caravan neared the home of the Booths Frank and I began to grow uncomfortable. We had not yet summoned up courage to tell Judge Groves and his family of the mental condition they would find Sam in. It seemed a pity to spoil their pleasant anticipations with such disagreeable news. But it would undoubtedly be better to tell them something in advance, than to subject them to the shock of discovering his condition for themselves.

Oldham, Frank's brother-in-law, finally took the task off our hands. He explained that the trouble was wholly due to loneliness and would doubtless pass away of itself when Sam had friends to keep him company.

And that, I may add here, was what actually happened. A few years later I met Sam, then a prosperous farmer and a very different-appearing man. In allusion to the time I had staid with him, he said: "Yes, I certainly did have it bad that night."

Before the family left us we learned that they were from the mountains of West Virginia. The exact cause of Sam's leaving home we did not learn till later. But it afterwards came out that the young fellow had been made drunk by some older companions, and while in that condition he had hurt one of them seriously, almost fatally. For this crime he had fled to Texas. He had continued to write back to his friends till his growing insanity made him too cautious.

Our party camped along the creek-bank, near the Booth farm—all except the Groves family, who drove on over to the sheep-ranch. Frank and Stella, and also their father and mother, urged me to stay with them at least a week. But it was important that I get home for other reasons, and also to guide my caravan. One day I spent with the Booths, while the immigrants were resting their teams and doing some washing.

Next morning early I took leave of my friends. Frank and I promised to visit each other if circumstances would permit; and both he and Stella promised to keep up a regular correspondence with me till we should meet at school.

From here on I led the way, Lep tramping steadily before me, and the long, rumbling wagon-train strung out behind me. We camped one night at Lookout Gap, and I noticed that the spot of prairie that I had burnt to frighten the mountain-lion was green again—greener than the surrounding prairie. I had stopped at the settler's south of the mountains to return the borrowed slicker, and further on I halted a minute at Kelly's to leave his lariat.

It was with no small measure of satisfaction, and even pride, that I rode down the Little Pecan Creek country late one afternoon, the long-horned object of my search in front of me, and twenty-three canvas-topped wagons bombarding the stumpy road behind me. Indeed, my home-coming from that ox-hunt was an event long talked of, and still talked of, in our settlement. And the nearly twenty families I had brought with me made an important addition to the neighborhood.

The wagons stopped and went into camp on Lick Branch. But I, with Lep still before me and Vic scampering delightedly around me, rode on over, went down the hill and crossed the creek to the house. That double log-cabin among the oaks looked good to me after my long absence.

"Well, you did make a long trip of it," was mother's greeting, after I had dismounted and gone in. "We got your letters and postal cards; but we had begun to think you and Lep would take a trip around the world before you got back."

Father shook hands with me and said, in his cheerful way:

"Rather guessed you'd be showing up around here before many days. That's the way. When you start after a thing stay with it till you get it. It seems, though, that you've brought back more than you carried off."

But even father, who had been through many exciting experiences in his younger days—cattle-driving, gold-mining and Indian-fighting—opened his eyes when I told him all that had actually happened to me on my long saddle-trip. For much had been omitted from my letters.

Next morning I tied strings to a big sack, and the sack around my waist, and went to picking cotton. And very peaceful and home-like it seemed out there among the white-armed, deadened trees, with the stillness broken only by the songs of birds, or by the drumming of a woodpecker on a dead limb. The cotton was white in the rows, and all I had to do was to reach for it. There were no vexatious problems to solve as to how to get it out.

On the whole I was very glad to be at home again. A life of constant excitement and adventure is far less pleasant than many stay-at-home boys imagine. In fact such a life is usually more interesting, and vastly more comfortable, to hear about or read about than to experience.

When the cotton-picking was ended I yoked up Lep and Coaly and went to plowing in some of the richest, stumpiest ground that ever sprouted a cotton-seed or knocked the breath out of a plowboy.

The new-comers were well pleased with the country I had led them to. They bought all the land that father had to sell, at a fair profit over what he had paid for it, and a few hundred acres besides. And they promptly set to work to build log-homes, and to clear farms out of the post-oak and black-jack woods. A few of them afterwards sold out and moved away; but most of them became substantial and prosperous citizens, and they and their children are still living there.

The land that father sold was sold mostly on time, but it practically freed us from debt. And, thanks to that and a good cotton-crop the next season, I was able to go away to school the following fall. There I found three acquaintances: Frank Booth and his sister, whom I had expected to find, and demure little Nannie Renfro, whose being there was a surprise to me. Nannie and Stella had kept up a regular correspondence, and it was through Stella's influence—and Frank's also, perhaps—that Nannie had come.

Both Stella and I remained in school till we had graduated, I one year and she the next.

For a time I cherished some rather vague plans of going to West Point. And I even exchanged a few letters with Colonel Davis regarding the matter. But my natural bent was toward books rather than arms, and before the time came to seek an appointment I had changed my plans.

Doubtless I was aided in this decision by the president of the college, who, because I learned languages readily, took occasion to intimate to me before I had been in school very long that I could look forward to being a teacher. And even before my graduation he had offered me a position as assistant teacher of Latin and Greek. Eventually I became the teacher of Greek.

Frank remained in school two years, then dropped out and himself went to teaching, in country schools. Not long afterwards he married Nannie Renfro, who had also dropped out.

But theirs was not the only wedding that grew out of our cattle-hunting trip. The next fall after her graduation, Stella Booth and I—

Just at this point somebody, looking over my shoulder as I write, deftly removes the pen from my fingers.

"But I don't want you to tell people that you were hunting for a long-horned steer when you found me! I don't want to be associated with long-horns."

And when I explain that destiny, baiting me with a runaway ox, was really leading me on a hunt for the best wife in the world, she looks decidedly pleased, but is still not satisfied.

"I don't believe in destiny—much," she declares, with some of her old-time independence. "Being the right kind of a man has more to do with finding the right kind of a wife than any old destiny that ever was."

And so, in deference to the wishes of the dark-eyed woman, I pass over, with this bare allusion, what might have been the most interesting chapter of my narrative.

And doubtless that is as it should be. For this is the story of an ox-hunt, and not a romance of love and courtship and marriage. Hence what is best must be told in fewest words.

For some reason Lep never tried to run away again. Perhaps he thought it useless to try. Possibly he felt that he had already made as big a stir in the world as one humble work-ox is entitled to make. He was kept hobbled much of the time till we fenced our pasture; and after that he remained inside. There, at a mature old age, he finally ended his useful career. And it has long been a matter of sincere regret to me that his great horns were not preserved.

The years run on apace, and swift changes come with them. The wild and half-wild region through which Frank Booth and I made our eventful saddle-trip is now crowded with farms and dotted with homes and towns and cities. And the frontier has practically disappeared. The lawlessness that we encountered was even then meeting law in clash of battle, and soon went down, never to rise again. Nowhere on the face of the earth, perhaps, are life and property and reputation safer, or a law-breaker more unsafe, and nowhere is the cause of righteousness making swifter strides, than within the broad confines of the broadest state in the Union.

And the best is still to come. The things of today are better than those of yesterday. And the things of tomorrow shall, we can believe, by the aid of good men marching in line with and keep step with the ever-marching providence of God, be better than the things of today.

(The End.)



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